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Citation: Cerase, Damian Saverio (2014) Tightropes and tripwires: a Buddhist interpretation of suffering through attachment in Kafka's work. [Thesis] (Unpublished)

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Research degree thesis

Tightropes and tripwires: a Buddhist interpretation of suffering through attachment in Kafka's work

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Declaration

The work presented in this thesis is the candidate's own.

Abstract

The aim of the dissertation is to challenge perceptions of Kafka's work as negative by developing more constructive readings of the accounts of suffering and abandonment which form an undeniable feature of his writing. The term 'Kafkaesque' is now in widespread use to indicate a situation or event characterised by frustration and torment, but this designation paints an unnecessarily bleak picture of Kafka's fictional landscapes.

One path towards a brighter view of his art is offered by Buddhism, which puts suffering at the centre of its philosophy and yet develops a positive spiritual outlook on life. It does so by giving clear reasons for suffering based on natural causes, leaving no room for mysterious or irresistible forces. From a Buddhist standpoint, the most formidable barrier to alleviating suffering is not presented by a powerful Court or an impregnable Castle, but by the human self or – more precisely – attachment to self.

The Buddhist approach to Kafka reads his works in two complementary ways, for content (information) and form (expression). The first examines the close parallels between key Buddhist teachings (such as on suffering and emptiness) and predominant themes from Kafka's writing (such as futile quests after recognition and justice); the second explores the gaps and paradoxes that confront Kafka's characters and readers, and measures them against the absurd, nonsensical utterances (koans) used by Zen masters to nonplus their students and loosen their dependency on conventional modes of thinking.

In this way, it will be shown that the suffering Kafka describes so relentlessly can be traced back to personal attachments rather than intervention by external agencies.

Acknowledgments

In memory of my father, Eliodoro Cerase, and his example of selflessness.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Joanne Leal and Dr John Walker, for their astute guidance and support, and especially my wife, Chantawan, for her patience and fortitude throughout a long process.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Suffering and attachment

*Human beings' intellectual side is very important for their lives. Descartes said, 'I think, therefore I am'. That is a human being. Originally, thinking is not good and not bad. But everybody becomes attached to their thinking, so they have a problem.*¹

Kafka's work has been viewed from many angles and associated with many ideas, but despite the rich variation of readings there has still been sufficient common ground to allow the term 'Kafkaesque' to gain widespread currency. A typical dictionary entry refers to the 'nightmarish atmosphere or situations portrayed in his stories'.² Accordingly, an event or account earns the description 'Kafkaesque' if it depicts a gloomy, sinister world where the individual struggles in vain against shadowy, inimical forces.

Kafka's fiction is undoubtedly concerned with suffering – its pages tell of persecution, frustration, torture, alienation, dislocation or death, and are characteristically pervaded with a suffocating atmosphere of failure. Few critics would argue with this overall evaluation, but Kafka's writing still holds enough ambiguity to have spawned a multitude of different interpretations of why he explored with such consistency the troubles which befall and baffle the common man. This disagreement about how Kafka's grim tales of despair could be read suggests that labelling Kafka's work under 'suffering' leaves much ground uncovered, and the occasional outbreaks of more positive episodes, such as K.'s survival in *Das Schloß*, offer further cause to resist the bleak connotations which have taken hold of the Kafkaesque.

The aim of this dissertation is to lift the sombre air that cloaks Kafka's work and find a way of engaging with his texts which allows for a constructive

1 Seung Sahn, *The Compass of Zen* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 29.

2 *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 1469.

reading of the undeniable feature of suffering in his writing. I would like to propose a Buddhist line of enquiry to re-evaluate Kafka and redress the negative images associated with his work. I will argue that there are significant similarities between Buddhist ideas and the view of the world which emerges from Kafka's texts. The two key aspects of Buddhist thinking which support my thesis are the notions that the world is characterised by impermanence and that suffering derives from personal attachments: it is not the situation itself which is bleak, but our perception of it and reaction to it.

Buddhism puts suffering at the forefront of its doctrine, and this stance has been labelled as pessimistic (like the Kafkaesque).³ On closer investigation, however, its guiding principles reveal a pragmatic philosophy which places salvation (or nirvana) within reach of all sentient beings under the right conditions. Buddhism handles suffering with positivity, and turns it into fertile ground from which enlightenment can sprout; the same transformation can be detected in Kafka's work, to the extent that his unrelenting focus on pain resembles a physician's concern to treat diseased parts of body and mind.

There is no suggestion that Kafka was influenced by Buddhist thinking, but there appears to be a degree of spiritual attunement on the question of suffering, how it is caused by craving and attachment, and how it can be made to cease. This dissertation proposes therefore to undertake a Buddhist reading of Kafka's work on the basis that their shared affinities will offer a different insight into the accounts of suffering that are often taken as expressions of hopelessness. The interpretation will follow two distinct but complementary approaches, considering what is presented as information (content, to be

3 'Some critics argue that Buddhism is morbid, cynical, hovering on the dark and shadowy side of life [...] They claim that Buddhism is pessimistic, fostering an attitude of hopelessness towards life, encouraging a vague, general feeling that pain and evil predominate in human affairs.' K. Sri Dhammanada, *What Buddhists Believe* (Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia, 2002), p. 181.

understood intellectually), and what serves as demonstration (form, to be experienced intuitively).

In the first approach, the themes, events and characterisations arising in Kafka's work will be compared with the ideas presented in the basic precepts of Buddhist thought. Teachings such as The Three Universal Characteristics and The Four Noble Truths seek to describe the underlying truth of existence as impermanent and empty of fixed meaning, and explain human suffering as the consequence of our inability to see that all phenomena, including our own selves, are subject to constant change. In the second approach, the paradoxes, equivocations and ambiguities which are frequently used to deliver communication in Kafka's texts will be compared with the linguistic techniques deployed by Zen masters to confound their students and catapult them into an unmediated experience of the emptiness which lies beneath the ordered surface reality perceived by the unawakened mind. Their use of *koans* and *mondos* (absurd and contradictory utterances which do not follow conventional rules of logic) bears a striking resemblance to significant passages in Kafka's writing style, especially the aphorisms, suggesting a common purpose: to loosen attachment to meaning.⁴

Before looking in greater detail at the ideas in Buddhism which find some resonance in Kafka's work and make a positive reading possible, it is worth

4 The following examples of (1) a koan and (2) a mondo (an exchange) are provided by Henry Rosemont Jr in 'The Meaning is the Use: Koan and Mondo as Linguistic Tools of the Zen Masters', in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol 20, No. 2 (Apr 1970), pp. 109-19.

(1) A monk asked Tung-shan, 'Who is the Buddha?'
'Three pounds of flax.'

(2) Shobi: What is your given name?
Kyozan: Ye-jaku.

Shobi: What is 'ye'? What is 'jaku'?

Kyozan: Right before you.

Shobi: Still there is a before-and-after.

Kyozan: Let us put aside the question of before-and-after. O master, what do you see?

Shobi: Have a cup of tea.

investigating the potential reasons why Kafka has tended to be associated with a pessimistic outlook on the world.

1.1.1 Consensus: sentenced to suffering

*If we view life as somehow overpowering or trapping us, as in some way undermining our will to live as we wish, as strengthening the forces that wait malevolently for human endeavour to falter, then we enter Kafka's world of the Kafkaesque.*⁵

If we accept the ingrained negativity of the Kafkaesque, Kafka depicts suffering as an unavoidable conclusion, an insurmountable obstacle which chokes off any growth or development in the human condition. The name Kafka has become shorthand for the 'alienation of modern man',⁶ and his work conjures up depressing images, from 'a lonely and almost nihilist quality'⁷ to a 'mighty juggernaut revving up in the distance, but whose purpose or function cannot be ascertained'.⁸ It is not surprising that Kafkaesque suggests suffering that is as crushing as it is meaningless and unjust.

In order to readjust perceptions of Kafka, it would help to find common elements in definitions of the Kafkaesque, in case there is a pattern to the depictions of powerlessness which would indicate why predominantly negative connotations come to the fore. The typical Kafka hero is far from perfect, but the source of his troubles is often attributed to an inaccessible person or an inscrutable authority, and rarely traced back to character faults, ignorance or poor decision-making. The troubles arise as inevitable consequences of a person's interaction with his society and environment, and appear as insoluble

5 Frederick R. Karl, *Franz Kafka: Representative Man* (New York: Fromm International, 1991), pp. 758-59.

6 Stanley Corngold and Benno Wagner, *Franz Kafka: the Ghosts in the Machine* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. 35.

7 Max Lerner, 'The Human Voyage' in Angel Flores, ed., *The Kafka Problem* (New York: Gordian Press, 1975), p. 45.

8 Karl, p. 759.

as they are overwhelming: in short, human beings are doomed.⁹ Just as Josef K.'s uncle foretells the inescapable outcome of his nephew's trial, a Kafkaesque predicament is bound to end badly.¹⁰

Kafka's victims are overpowered by a superior force, either unknown or arbitrary in its judgments, or both.¹¹ They are neither sinners nor saints, but despite their apparent flaws the punishment inflicted on them seems unjust: excessive and out of proportion with their misdemeanours. Moreover, Kafka's customary economy of biographical detail about his characters contributes to the rise of enigmatic 'everyman' figures – part innocent, part guilty – with interest deflected away from the little that is known about the victim, towards what is unknown.

As a result, much of what is puzzling and unsettling about the Kafkaesque concerns its 'gaps': what is not recounted is as much a feature of the Kafkaesque as what is. The reader's attention lies not only with how the textual heroes suffer and how they react to their torments, but also with related issues that are not explicitly elaborated on, such as where exactly this suffering comes from (its origin), why it is inflicted (its meaning), and what can be done about it (its eradication). Hence, we read about the consequences of Josef K.'s arrest and his futile attempts to resist, but not of the cause of the arrest; we watch Gregor Samsa's struggle to come to terms with his new insect form, but wonder why it happened in the first place; we witness K.'s battles with villagers and minor Castle officials, but we are ignorant of the greater power behind the scenes.

9 'In Kafka, long before the sentence is executed [...] something terrible has been done to the accused.' Lionel Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955), p. 38.

10 'Einen solchen Proceß haben, heisst ihn schon verloren haben.' Franz Kafka, *Der Proceß*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1990), p. 126.

11 Jane Bennett describes the Kafkaesque as 'being subject to a will not one's own whose source is unknowable or indeterminate' in 'Deceptive Comfort: The Power of Kafka's Stories', *Political Theory*, Vol 19, No. 1 (Feb 1991), p. 75.

The lack of a 'smoking gun' to convict Kafka's sufferers of wrongdoing, however much they might contribute to their own downfall, helps to shift suspicion on to the hidden 'authorities': Josef K. searches in vain for the cause of his arrest; K. finds no rationale for his exclusion from the Castle; Gregor Samsa metamorphoses for no clear reason; and Georg Bendemann is sentenced for an apparent bagatelle. If our lives are founded on the notion of justice, we are dismayed to conclude that Kafka's texts leave the suspect parties at large and unpunished, while his heroes suffer the consequences.¹²

The textual 'blind spots' which hinder definitive readings have been the subject of much speculation. Critics have probed Kafka's personal background, diaries and contemporary history for material which might provide some answers. Many feel, for example, that Kafka's difficult relationship with an overbearing father could explain the problems some of his characters have with authority: Georg Bendemann and Gregor Samsa, for instance, wilt under severe paternal disapproval. Similarly, Kafka's 'failure' to settle down to a conventional family life with all its obligations (at the expense of his writing) has prompted much comparison with his more nightmarish creations, to the extent that K.'s trial with the Court mirrors Kafka's tribulations with Felice Bauer.¹³

As well as drawing on Kafka's life, critics have drawn from their own political, religious and philosophical convictions in an attempt to locate the key to these narrative enigmas. This has given rise to a kaleidoscopic mix of readings of Kafka, ranging from the Freudian and the Marxist, the Christian and the Jewish, to the existentialist and the deconstructionist:

12 Bluma Goldstein refers to Kafka's 'tragedies about those who suffer profound isolation and detachment', in 'Andy Warhol: His Kafka and "Jewish Geniuses"', *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol 7, No. 1 (Fall 2000), p. 134.

13 Elias Canetti discusses the 'tribunal' sparked by Kafka's broken engagement in *Der andere Prozess* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1969).

Marxism wrote Kafka off as catering to a bourgeois society, claiming that as a purveyor of weakness Kafka offered nothing to a society or state attempting to achieve change through betterment of the masses.

Freudian criticism [...] tended to limit Kafka's work to interpretations of the oedipal struggle between father and son.

Poststructuralist criticism pointed to the lack of center in Kafka, the inability of the reader and critic to find precise meanings.¹⁴

Further to – perhaps owing to – the focus on the gaps in Kafka's texts, these different lines of enquiry often end up at similar conclusions:

'Kafkaesque at its most meaningful and exalted denotes a world that has its own rules, its own guidelines, its own forms of behavior that cannot be amenable to human will.'¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, Kafka's message has come to define man's hopeless earthly existence: unfathomable, futile, dark, threatened and doomed.¹⁶

A common thread binding disparate Kafka interpretations in a critical consensus is their grounding in Western philosophical or spiritual traditions. The Kafkaesque suggests conflict between human will and the world, between that which lies within the self and that which lies without.¹⁷ It could be argued that there are certain principles within much Western thought that make Kafka's texts appear in a more negative light. The self takes the central role, whether in a Judaeo-Christian production scripted by a superior being or in a deconstructionist piece stripped of stage directions. Jerrold Seigel notes this primacy of the person: 'More than any other world culture, the modern West has made the debate about individuality and selfhood a central question –

¹⁴ Karl, p. 758.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 757.

¹⁶ Alberto Spaini talks of spiritual torture in Kafka, where 'every attempt toward liberation ended fatally in a tragic catastrophe', from 'The Trial' in Angel Flores, ed., *The Kafka Problem* (New York: Gordian Press, 1975), p. 148.

¹⁷ Kafka's writing helped to 'define the reciprocally damaging relationship between society and the individual will'. Ronald Speirs and Beatrice Sandberg, *Franz Kafka* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 137.

perhaps the central question – of its collective attempts at self-definition.’¹⁸ Kafka’s fiction of suffering sets self and creator on a collision course and, in an ironic twist, the positive assertion of selfhood which drives the search for fulfilment could in Kafka’s fictional world turn into a millstone which burdens the individual with suffering.

Charles Taylor defines the self within ‘frameworks’, which set out the commitments and attachments we live by. He suggests it is impossible to live outside such a framework because ‘living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency’, and ‘stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood’.¹⁹ In Buddhist thinking neither self nor creator exists in absolute form, but instead a world of impermanence holds sway. Because the integrity of the self is illusory, Buddhists would consider the pursuit of self-driven goals as futile and the reliance on self-determined values as misguided.²⁰

Taylor also proposes the idea of a ‘buffered self’, which allows the modern Western individual the possibility of ‘taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind’.²¹ In contrast to the ‘porous self’ of centuries past, the ‘buffered self’ protects its boundaries, seeing itself ‘as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it’.²² To a ‘buffered self’ accustomed to high levels of control and security, the challenges posed by the Kafkaesque can seem nightmarish, as the hitherto impregnable walls of selfhood show cracks which are exploited by hostile agents from Court, Castle and alike. To

18 Jerrold E Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 4.

19 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 27.

20 It is perhaps the ‘non-personal’ aspect of Buddhist goals which perplexes the Western mind: ‘Buddhism must ever remain a mystery to the Faustian striving of Western man’, from Thomas J. J. Altizer’s ‘Religion and Reality’ in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol 38, No. 4 (Oct 1958), p. 256.

21 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 38.

22 Ibid., p. 38.

the Buddhist reader, however, any attempt to bolster the self is deemed misguided and ultimately futile, owing to the irresistible (impersonal) forces of change in the universe. Hence, when Josef K. and kindred characters staunchly defend (or buffer) their selfhood, it is not a heroic rearguard action against invasion, but a hopeless stand on the shore against an advancing tide: the individual must either prepare to get wet (and face the consequences, such as Josef K.'s execution) or retreat (and find another path, as does K. by relinquishing his quest).

If the troubles of Kafka's heroes are taken as representative of the inevitable defeat facing flawed humans in a hostile environment, then a pessimistic conclusion must be drawn from his writing. But if Kafka's work is perceived as being in tune with the Buddhist treatment of suffering, his art could be recalibrated from 'debilitating self-laceration'²³ to a more constructive analysis of how the common individual habitually punishes himself.

Buddhism's focus on suffering derives from the compassionate wish to convey a realistic and objective assessment of the causes of suffering, such as ignorance and ego-fuelled desire, in order to propose a way to end it, through insight and awareness.²⁴ Similarly, it can be argued that Kafka's texts do not portray suffering to bemoan the misery of life, but they expose attachments and cravings to awaken the deluded self from its ignorance.

1.1.2 Dissident voices: resisting suffering

I would like to advance an unorthodox argument in the Kafka-debate, namely that there is a positive element of existential promise in Kafka's works which,

²³ Richard T. Gray, *Constructive Destruction. Kafka's Aphorisms: Literary Tradition and Literary Transformation* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1987), p. 199.

²⁴ '[Critics] base their views on The First Noble Truth that all conditioned things are in a state of suffering. They do not see that not only had the Buddha taught the cause of Suffering, but He also taught the way to end Suffering.' K. Sri Dhammanada, p. 181.

*because Kafka has so often been negatively and pessimistically interpreted, has been overlooked and obscured.*²⁵

Some critics have already challenged the pessimistic connotations that come with the Kafkaesque, and their more encouraging views open the way to a more positive reception. No longer at the forefront of a lost generation of writers ‘incapable of any reasoned judgment’,²⁶ Kafka receives a kinder verdict from readers who sense in his art the hand of ‘an existential saint’²⁷ or ‘an intuitive Zen master’.²⁸ The following commentators, for example, spy glimpses of hope and insight in Kafka’s portrayals of suffering, and it is telling that their constructive interpretations are often at odds with Judaeo-Christian traditions.

To begin with, Hinrich Siefken argues that it is not necessary to interpret Kafka’s works negatively, and it is through ‘das Befremden des Lesers’ that ‘eine andere “Entwicklung” der Handlung wünschenswert denkbar wird’.²⁹ The suffering recounted sits in the mindsets of the main characters (and readers), and figures such as Josef K. and K. are blind to other possibilities owing to ‘ihre Überzeugung von der Sinnträchtigkeit ihrer Schritte, die das verhindert’.³⁰ By loading the burden of suffering on to the protagonists themselves, and not on their situations or nemeses, Siefken approaches the Buddhist view that Kafka’s deluded heroes fall victim to their own attachments, though an element of the self-fuelled quest for a ‘better’ (i.e. more meaningful) outcome remains.

25 Christian Goodden, ‘The Prospect of a Positive Existential Alternative’, in Angel Flores, ed., *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives For Our Time* (New York: Gordian Press, 1977), p. 100.

26 Edwin Berry Burgum, ‘The Bankruptcy of Faith’ in Angel Flores, ed., *The Kafka Problem* (New York: Gordian Press, 1975), p. 299.

27 Van Meter Ames, ‘America, Existentialism, and Zen’ in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol 1, No. 1 (Apr 1951), p. 43.

28 Dennis McCort, *Going Beyond the Pairs: The Coincidence of Opposites in German Romanticism, Zen and Deconstruction* (New York: SUNY, 2001), p. 15.

29 Hinrich Siefken, *Kafka: Ungeduld und Lässigkeit* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1977), p. 110.

30 Ibid., p. 110.

In similar vein, Christian Goodden's appeal for a more positive way of reading Kafka stems from his observation that the main protagonist often makes poor decisions which lead to poor consequences. In other words, the individual is not destined to fail, and the suffering is not inevitable: it is of his own making. Goodden suggests we should focus on what the characters do incorrectly, rather than speculate on the supposedly cruel, arbitrary, mysterious authorities which confound them. Once more, this position has Buddhist elements, in that the prospect of a release from suffering is available to every person, through individual insight and action. Like Siefken, however, Goodden remains on Judaeo-Christian ground when he maintains that making the right choices would have led to successful outcomes. In contrast, the serial failings of Kafka's characters would suggest to a Buddhist that their downfall does not stem from *what* they do, but from *how* they do it, with what 'mind' or outlook.

The views of Siefken and Goodden reflect some divergence from the Kafkaesque quicksands of meaningless suffering, because they contend that Kafka's characters had better options, but this does not address the question why they suffer in the first place, or offer any guarantee of salvation. Dennis McCort takes a different approach by aligning Kafka with Zen, German Romanticism and deconstruction in a quest for the *coincidentia oppositorum*. This search is primarily religious in nature, and comes from man's 'ineradicable yearning for ultimate reconciliation',³¹ or the desire to escape the delusions and imperfections of the petty self, in exchange for access to the universal Self, or the 'primordial interconnectedness of things'.³²

Despite the influence figures such as Meister Eckhart and Fechner had on Kafka, McCort suggests that these forerunners merely confirmed what

31 McCort, p. 3.

32 Ibid., p. 29.

Kafka was already in the process of discovering for himself. His writing developed a 'distinctly Zen flavor', taking on characteristics reminiscent of the techniques used to aid meditation practice and awaken 'a deeper level of the mind beyond the discursive intellect'.³³ In other words, McCort senses in Kafka intuitive perceptions which are akin to Buddhist insights, and hence Kafka becomes a kind of 'honorary' Buddhist: 'The renowned eighteenth-century Zen master Hakuin once remarked that we must come to regard all of existence as one great koan. This, it seems to me, is what Franz Kafka did.'³⁴

It could be maintained, however, that McCort misrepresents Kafka's attunement to Buddhist views when he involves Zen in the search for the *coincidentia*. The Romantic sensibility may have rejected the self as a 'discrete conscious being or entity', but McCort goes on to explain the Romantics' desire for the 'self as a relationship', for *Verbindung* with the cosmos at large: God is everything, the being or the state in which all opposites merge into a blissful whole. Buddhism equally looks towards a realm beyond duality (nirvana), but it is a kind of non-place beyond self, bliss and pain. This represents a marked contrast in perception, for where the impassioned mystic longs to expand the self to infinity in order to be at one with the All (and still be around to marvel at the wonder of it), the enlightened Buddhist path diminishes the self to nothing, to the point where the division between individual and the All disappears.

McCort sees in Kafka examples of a longing for existence beyond the separateness of the self, but according to Buddhist thinking any 'longing' is a reflection of the strong desires of the ego, and thus the distinctness of the self is simply reinforced. It could be argued that Kafka's writing offers scepticism about such 'yearnings'. Many of his characters display pronounced traits of

33 McCort., p. 76.

34 Ibid., p. 76.

craving, attachment and tenacity, and all these features can be considered manifestations of an ego or a self beyond control. The failed quest that many critics have noted in Kafka's work becomes then an indication of a character's internal delusion.

Like McCort, Patrick Bridgwater turns to non-Judaeo-Christian influences, discussing Kafka's interest in Eastern philosophy by tracing a line back to Hinduism through Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.³⁵ Hinduism shares some characteristics with Buddhism, but it is suggested that Kafka found it somewhat unsatisfying. Bridgwater refers to Kafka's declaration (reportedly made to Janouch) that he was both repelled and attracted by the 'indischen Religionsdokumente', attributing to them 'ein abgrundtiefer Pessimismus' and 'einen unausgesprochenen, eisigen Haß des Lebens'.³⁶ Bridgwater concludes that Kafka ultimately saw Eastern religions in a negative light because he had been exposed chiefly to Hinduism, and speculates that a closer familiarity with Buddhism instead might have resulted in a more positive assessment.³⁷

Although he does not elaborate on how Buddhism might have offered relevant insights into Kafka, Bridgwater does stress how important the prospect of hope was for Kafka: '[H]ad [Kafka] known more about Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, he would probably have been more deeply attracted to it, although this is mere speculation.'³⁸ This dissertation argues that Buddhist ideas could lay the basis for a more hopeful reading of Kafka, as they offer the means to understand suffering and deal with it.

Similarly opposed to 'negative' Kafka interpretations, Deleuze and Guattari posit a 'joyous' reading of his work, characterised by 'the total

35 Patrick Bridgwater, *Kafka and Nietzsche* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1974).

36 Gustav Janouch, *Gespräche mit Kafka* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1951), p. 49.

37 Bridgwater, *Kafka and Nietzsche*, pp. 45-46.

38 Ibid., p. 46.

absence of negation'.³⁹ They do this by underscoring 'the importance and force of desire in Kafka'.⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari celebrate in Kafka a life-affirming 'experimentation that is without interpretation or significance'.⁴¹ His writing side-steps the problem of 'being free' and instead offers accounts of 'finding a way out, or even a way in'.⁴² Hence, potential 'nightmarish' scenarios presented by 'the transcendence of the law, the interiority of guilt, the subjectivity of enunciation'⁴³ are dismantled as Kafka's writing shows how it is possible to 'effectively take a line of escape'.⁴⁴

Despite this championing of flight and movement in Kafka's work, Deleuze and Guattari occupy a 'self-centric' position which to Buddhist eyes would still be exposed to suffering. The prominence of desire, channelled through the individual, is unlikely to lead to enlightenment, in the Buddhist sense, as it elects to indulge personality, rather than transcend it, in order to find escape/salvation.

Christian Eschweiler rejects 'das Bild undurchdringlicher Dunkelheit und völliger Verwirrung' in Kafka's writing,⁴⁵ presenting a reworked version of *Der Prozeß* as an 'einzigartiges und wegweisendes Kunstwerk'.⁴⁶ Dismissing previous studies which maintain that 'bei Kafka sei "der Sinn eigentlich der Sinnlosigkeit"',⁴⁷ Eschweiler sees evidence of a clear message of hope: 'Kafka

39 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. xiii.

40 Ibid., p. xx.

41 Ibid., p. 7.

42 Ibid., pp. 7-8.

43 Ibid., p. 45.

44 Ibid., p. 59.

45 Christian Eschweiler, *Franz Kafka und sein Roman-Fragment: Der Prozess* (Weilerswist: Verlag Landpresse, 2009), p. 11. Eschweiler's views are explored in greater detail in chapter three.

46 Ibid., p. 8.

47 Christian Eschweiler, *Kafkas Dichtung als Kosmos* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1993), p. 77.

ist der helllichtige Wegweiser im Dunkel verirrter und verzweifelter Fragen, er ist der verantwortungsvolle Dichter und behutsame Knder der Hoffnung.⁴⁸

Eschweiler's texts abound with terms such as 'Ziel', 'Richtung', 'Erlsung' and 'Hoffnung' which conjure up positive images far removed from the bleak worlds usually associated with the Kafkaesque. His repeated use of 'Sinn', 'Bedeutung', 'Personlichkeit' and 'Geist' suggests that the source of this 'Hoffnungsschimmer' is located in a particular sense of self: '[Der Mensch] mu sich deshalb als Persnlichkeit im Sinn seiner Bestimmung und Auszeichnung in allen Entscheidungen und im Unterschied zu allen anderen irdischen Lebewesen rechtfertigen und bewhren.'⁴⁹ Each person has the responsibility 'sein Leben mit Sinn zu erfllen und dementsprechend bewut zu gestalten'.⁵⁰ Without sanctioning suicide or murder, this existential view urges the individual to take control by heeding 'dem Ruf des Geistes'⁵¹ and finding 'in dem notwendigen Tod seine sinnvolle Erfllung'.⁵² The Buddhist understanding of 'Erlsung', however, involves non-attachment to self and thus 'self-driven' pursuits after 'den Sinn des Lebens' are more likely to lead to further suffering than a release from it.⁵³

These alternative readings try to steer a positive course through Kafka's work, but from a Buddhist viewpoint the self still acts as navigator. For a more radical transformation of the Kafkaesque, this thesis proposes that a reading influenced by the Buddhist preference for reflective self-detachment rather than active self-fulfilment opens up an alternative route to a more 'positive' evaluation of his work.

48 Eschweiler, *Kosmos*, p. 18.

49 Ibid., p. 14.

50 Eschweiler, *Roman-Fragment*, p. 12.

51 Christian Eschweiler, *Der verborgene Hintergrund in Kafkas 'Der Proze'* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1990), p. 69.

52 Eschweiler, *Kosmos*, pp. 12-13.

53 Ibid., p. 11.

1.1.3 Transformation: sleepwalking into suffering

*The Buddha called the untrained mind 'being asleep while awake'. This means not understanding what we experience.*⁵⁴

Although the preceding dissident voices do challenge 'negative' interpretations of Kafka's work, this recalibration tends to be achieved by showing that the 'darker' elements in Kafka's work could be seen as 'lighter', thereby avoiding the need to rein in the supremacy of the self. In this way, suffering is not eradicated but 'spun' into something more palatable: death is not the 'end' or 'punishment', but in fact 'die erstrebte Erfüllung'.⁵⁵

From a Buddhist viewpoint, rendering Kafka's work more 'joyous' in this way merely applies a gloss to the harsh realities of life, like wearing tinted lenses to 'see' objects in a more favourable light. This is a circuitous route to a 'positive' reading because each instance of discontentment has to be mined for evidence of 'Sinn', in order to 'displace' suffering and leave a more aesthetically pleasing landscape. Buddhism takes a more direct path by leaving suffering as it is and acting on the perception of it: by working on attachment to self pressure is brought to bear internally on the root cause of suffering (ignorance) rather than focusing efforts externally on the effects.

The Buddha stated that suffering is largely caused by our ignorance, rather than our misfortunes or misdemeanours, hence the notion of 'being asleep while awake'. Taking a similar approach would help transform perceptions of Kafka's work. By associating the suffering experienced by Kafka's characters with their degree of attachment to self, a picture emerges that suggests Kafka had a view of enlightenment consistent with Buddhist thinking.

⁵⁴ Ayya Khema, *Who is my Self?* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997), p. 67.

⁵⁵ Eschweiler, *Kosmos*, p. 11.

The sleepwalking metaphor is particularly apposite when reading Kafka for several reasons, and it is worth noting coincidentally that Janouch attributes to Kafka remarks which support the Buddhist view on how human beings slide inadvertently into suffering: 'Die Menschen werden schlecht und schuldig dadurch, daß sie sprechen und handeln, ohne die Wirkung ihrer eigenen Worte und Taten sich vorzustellen. Es sind Traumwandler, nicht Bösewichte'.⁵⁶

First, the ubiquitous suffering in Kafka's texts need not be interpreted as punishment (undeserved or otherwise) for sinful acts (known or unknown), but can be understood as the effect of unenlightened behaviour. The image of the sleepwalker suggests a person who is not aware of his actions and, from a Buddhist viewpoint, not awake. 'Buddha' means 'awakened one' and Buddhist teaching recommends addressing life with one's eyes open. The Kafkaesque begins to shed its sinister overtones once Kafka's troubled heroes are viewed as too wrapped up in their sense of self to notice that they are sleepwalking into discontent.

Second, it is not necessary to reject as anomalies those instances where suffering is absent from Kafka's texts, or where his characters deal skillfully with life's challenges and disappointments; those accounts of equanimity fit seamlessly into the broad theme of (non-)awakening from clinging, by presenting the advantages of engaged detachment.

Third, the image of the sleepwalker works well with the economy of background information provided for Kafka's key figures because it sidesteps all the usual details that add 'colour' to a person's life – the only thing that is important is the moment itself during which actions are undertaken. In a

⁵⁶ Janouch, p. 56. These comments could be taken from a Buddhist textbook explaining how karma, a natural energy generated by volition, shapes lives. Such a view neutralises the power of external forces and makes individuals responsible for their own suffering. A more detailed account of karma follows in chapter two.

Judaeo-Christian reading, for example, the missing information about Josef K.'s past life is a distraction: it begs the question whether he is deserving of punishment, or whether the Court is a malevolent force. For the Buddhist reader, the minutiae of Josef K.'s life history are irrelevant and would serve as unnecessary diversions if they were included in the novel: it is sufficient to observe Josef K.'s immediate actions to evaluate his motivations.

It is interesting to see how a Buddhist philosophy built on suffering and impermanence can offer a more positive reading of Kafka's work than Judaeo-Christian philosophies based on the ideals of justice and freedom. While emptiness is the definitive, 'primary' concept of the Buddhist universe, there is still room for notions such as selfhood, justice and freedom, but they are clearly designated as of secondary significance, and conditioned, not absolute: it is perfectly acceptable to steer one's life in accordance with values based on justice and freedom, but it must be remembered that they are empty of real substance, and hence an unshakeable faith in them – or pursuit of them – will be tested and lead to suffering.

The most difficult aspect of Buddhist philosophy is not its concepts, which follow a clear logic, but its application, because enlightenment depends on emerging from the fog of attachments which crystallise into an apparently permanent sense of self. For this reason, Kafka's work has a distinctly Buddhist outlook, because it explores the human tendency to wander blindly into suffering: '[Buddhism is] concerned with how to step out of our usual sleepwalking and deal really with actual situations.'⁵⁷

57 Chögyam Trungpa, *Glimpses of Abhidharma*, (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), p. 3.

1.2 A Buddhist approach

*Der wahre Weg geht über ein Seil, das nicht in der Höhe gespannt ist, sondern knapp über dem Boden. Es scheint mehr bestimmt stolpern zu machen, als begangen zu werden.*⁵⁸

The key to creating a shift in perspective on Kafka lies in the way suffering is viewed and treated: as something alien to the self, a malignant foreign body dashing hopes and aims, which needs to be cut away like a tumour; or as an integral part of the self, reflecting those elements of character which build up deposits from desires and ideals, unable to let go. Buddhism adopts the latter view because it sees personal attachments and delusions as the portals through which suffering enters.⁵⁹

Taking a similar approach to Kafka helps lift the gloom from his work because the tortured souls in his writing are no longer victims of supernatural forces, but they reflect the unavoidable truth of how human beings contrive to trip themselves up with misguided values. Rather than look for hidden clues between the lines and outside the text to solve the mystery of suffering, the reader can find in the lines themselves evidence of the source of each character's troubles, and his potential release from them. In this way, Kafka's texts become less enigmatic and mystifying, because the problem and the solution can both be traced back to the same place: the individual's deluded outlook on his world. As Zen master Seung Sahn indicated in his reference to Descartes, the problem is not that human beings think: it is that they get *attached* to their thinking.

58 Aphorism 1 from Kafka's Zürau aphorisms, in *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente* (Vol. 2), ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1992), p. 113. Chapter four focuses on the aphorisms in more detail.

59 'Instead of trying to rationalize suffering, Buddhism takes suffering for granted and seeks the cause to eradicate it.' Mahathera Narada, *Buddhism in a Nutshell* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1982), p. 11.

The Buddha likened the Dharma (meaning ‘teachings’, ‘truth’ or ‘natural law’) to a raft which helps us to cross a river: once safely on the other shore we no longer need to carry it on our backs.⁶⁰ Thoughts such as these tell Buddhists that even the ‘Truth’ will become a burden if we grow attached to it. A similar sentiment emerges from Kafka’s first aphorism from Zürau (quoted above), in which the ‘true way’ appears as a tightrope and a tripwire, rather than a shining light. The Buddha’s raft and Kafka’s tightrope are useful tools which can help a person cross from ignorance to enlightenment, but they become worthless once the passage into the light has been completed: the raft-out-of-the-water and the tightrope-turned-tripwire have outlived their original purpose, and now serve as a reminder of how uncomfortable and unbalanced life can be if we drag all our ideals and principles around with us. This is not to say that we should jettison our hopes, values and standards, but simply that we refrain from attaching to them.

The raft conjures up a skillful image of interwoven salvation and suffering which encapsulates the Buddhist way of assessing the world around us. Kafka’s first aphorism can be viewed similarly, where the narrow tightrope signifies the lofty challenge of treading a steady, rational path, and the tripwire brings us back down to earth. In similar vein, this dissertation will read Kafka’s work using two methods: the first will approach the content of the texts by means of reason and explanation, looking for striking areas of consistency with Buddhist ideas; the second will set aside reason and explanation to consider how form in Kafka’s use of paradox and opaqueness evokes Zen techniques of illumination by striking at dependencies.

60 ‘O Monks, I have taught a doctrine similar to a raft - it is for crossing over, and not for carrying. You who understand that the teaching is similar to a raft, should give up attachment to even the good Dharma; how much more then should you give up evil things.’ Edward Conze, ed., *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages* (Oxford: Cassirer, 1954), pp. 87-88.

1.2.1 Content

*In the language of the Buddha, the word for fuel and for clinging is the same: upadana. The Buddha understood that suffering arises from and is fueled by clinging. When the fuel is removed, suffering is extinguished.*⁶¹

For the first approach to reading Kafka, it is necessary to establish the core philosophical tenets of the Dharma, or ‘Truth’. Buddhism covers different schools, such as Theravada, Mahayana and Zen, but the underlying ideas underpin them all through traditional teachings such as The Three Universal Characteristics, The Four Noble Truths, The Law of Dependent Origination and The Law of Karma.⁶² The doctrines, which will be considered in more detail in chapter two, derive from natural observation, rather than revelation: the aim is not to save a soul, but to point the way to an understanding of how the world works and how human lives unfold within it. There is no God, first cause or supreme power, and Buddhism does not pretend to have the answers to how or why the universe was created. It concentrates on the here-and-now and our relationship to it. The world comes first, and human beings are subject to the same physical laws that apply to every other constituent part of the universe – being a ‘person’ with the ability to think or reason does not come with the power to bend the rules. Buddhist teaching states squarely that the individual causes his own suffering through ignorance and attachment, but the same individual can tread a path towards release (salvation) by cultivating an enlightened detachment from cravings and desires. The key lies in clear-sightedness, in ‘waking up’ to reality and breaking free from needs and wants.

61 Gil Fronsdal in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/fuel-fires-suffering.

62 In this dissertation, Buddhist terms from Pali (such as ‘kamma’, ‘dhamma’, and ‘nibbana’) are used alongside their Sanskrit equivalents (i.e. ‘karma’, ‘dharma’, and ‘nirvana’ respectively) to reflect variations in source material.

In Theravada, which translates as ‘the way of the elders’, the focus is on alleviating suffering for the individual by leading him to awareness about the reality of existence. If Theravada is sometimes characterised as ‘dry’ in its teaching, Mahayana is more emotional and engaging: it follows the principles of Theravada practice, but places greater emphasis on compassion. This concern for the wellbeing of fellow human beings is exemplified in the figure of the ‘Bodhisattva’, representing the individual who has gained enlightenment and freed himself from the cycle of rebirth, but who has chosen not to enter nirvana in order to help those still suffering.⁶³ It extends the teachings on suffering and not-self into the notion of emptiness (*sunyata*), which encompasses everything and nothing: all life is one.

Zen is a rarefied form of Buddhism which takes on board all the main teachings of the Theravada and Mahayana – and rejects them all at the same time.⁶⁴ Rather than teach or explain, it seeks to induce understanding through demonstration. The Zen master does not trust language or logic, using non-sense and paradox to help practitioners detach themselves from delusions and propel them beyond dependencies. If the Mahayana puts a compassionate, human face on the cold-eyed facts of Theravada reasoning, Zen twists it into a gargoyle’s grimace.⁶⁵ It eschews logic and doctrine to transmit the Dharma, based on the assumption that the possibility of explaining emptiness directly is slim. For Zen, the inherent nature of language, words and text is emptiness, as with everything else, and this message is hard to convey with conventional tools and practices: instead of trying to define the properties of water, a Zen master is more likely to throw his students into the lake. Zen prefers to

63 The term is derived from bodhi (wisdom, supreme intelligence) and sattva (a state of being). A detailed definition is available in Christmas Humphreys’ work, *Buddhism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 158.

64 Humphreys calls Zen ‘the apotheosis of Buddhism’, *Buddhism*, p. 179.

65 Zen’s confrontational style recalls the ‘Fratzengesicht’ dazzled by the truth in Kafka’s aphorism 63 (*Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente* (Vol. 2), p. 127).

confound rather than expound, and this feature attracts comparisons with Kafka owing to his strategic deployment of ambiguities and paradoxes.

The converse of finding echoes of Buddhist thinking in Kafka's work is pointing up contrasts with Western (in particular Judaeo-Christian) principles, and the idea of selfhood casts these differences in the clearest relief. Where Buddhism treats ultimate and conventional reality as co-dimensional, Western thought works in terms of a single, limited here-and-now and an eternal afterlife placed in a linear continuum. This has implications for the degree of influence assumed by the self. Where existence progresses in linear fashion, the sense of self carries greater weight and momentum because the offsetting extra-conventional realm is only accessible post-here-and-now.

The Judaeo-Christian traditions uphold the notion of a unique soul for every living being, created by God, with the potential either to return to God or suffer estrangement from Him. During their life on earth, human beings act as 'carriers' for this divine essence, and they are judged on how well they take care of it. These terrestrial soul bearers become attached to these precious selves 'on hire' and assert ownership in the face of all threats and attacks. Earthly life unfolds based on a divine code which prepares for post-life eternity. The self is thus a key entity because access to the heavenly dimension depends on close compliance with the code, and it is the self which is measured to determine how well that has been achieved.

Non-religious philosophies in the Western tradition also assume the existence of a self in essence, and defend it just as closely as their theistic cousins in the absence of an external principle of meaningfulness (God). It falls to each individual to look after himself, and failing to do so brings the criticism of 'bad faith', of living life according to false beliefs, because without God the only truth is that which we can affirm ourselves. The 'mauvaise foi' described by Sartre cannot, however, be equated with an understanding of the

emptiness of ultimate reality. Removing a framework of belief creates a gap, but where Buddhism is content to leave it empty, Western thinking tends to abhor the vacuum and strives to fill it.⁶⁶

This is what Seigel means when he suggests that as much as the idea of selfhood is resisted, ‘radical’ modern Western figures, such as Foucault, Barthes and Derrida, or Nietzsche and Heidegger, inevitably re-introduced it by other means: ‘[They did so] on behalf of a vision of transcendent freedom that overwhelms the more modest visions of personal integration and regulated autonomy projected by the ideas and practices they sought to supersede.’⁶⁷ While Buddhism aims at a ‘transparency’ of selfhood or a reduction in its influence, Western thought conceives of grander schemes:

Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, Heidegger’s authentic *Dasein* [...] Derrida’s invocation of a condition beyond finitude where the promise of a wholly other existence is permanently maintained – all exemplify such aspirations. In other words, human beings must be all in order to escape being nothing.⁶⁸

The terms ‘transcendent freedom’ and ‘emptiness’ summarise respectively the contrast in its starkest form between the Judaeo-Christian (Western) self and its Buddhist counterpart, and this difference points the way towards a skillful interpretation of the Kafkaesque. The frustrated quests can be seen negatively as failed expansions of transcendent selfhood, or alternatively as misguided attempts to capture the mirage of the self. A similar difference in interpretation marks the second approach to reading Kafka, which evaluates the effects of consistently ambiguous and misleading narrative techniques.

66 Joseph W. Cohen places ‘the agony of a Kafka’ in the Western tradition of secular idealism and subjectivism, alongside Descartes’ *cogito* and romanticism, Schopenhauer and existentialism. ‘The Role of Philosophy in Culture’ in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol 5, No. 2 (Jul 1955), p. 108.

67 Seigel, pp. 4-5.

68 Ibid., p. 5.

1.2.2 Delivery

*Actually we cannot attain enlightenment until we give up the notion of 'me' personally attaining it.*⁶⁹

The second approach to Kafka moves from philosophical content to literary form and considers how the texts are presented, in terms of the impact that particular methods of expressions can have on the reader. The frequent use of paradox and contradiction means that an unsettling atmosphere of unreliability pervades Kafka's writing, which would be assessed differently by readers from Western and Buddhist standpoints.

In short, for the Judaeo-Christian reader for example, literature maps and defines, helping to broaden the mind and discover the self, thereby reinforcing the notion of individuality. Given such an outlook, Kafka's disconcerting aporia prevent the reader and protagonist from making firm and meaningful connections with the world, and hence the texts take on a negative aspect. In contrast, for the Buddhist reader, literature just pours more words (beautiful or otherwise) into a bottomless universe, perpetuating the myth of the integrity of selfhood. In this case, the gaps and convolutions in Kafka's work become the 'tripwires' which remind the individual how attachments in a world of essentially empty phenomena will lead to suffering, hence rendering possible a constructive interpretation.

One influential approach to the act of reading which is underpinned by Judaeo-Christian thinking has been provided by Wolfgang Iser. In *The Implied Reader* Iser suggests how far a reader's input shapes the 'meaning' of a text.⁷⁰ Each reading produces a different interpretation because the text resonates in different ways with the different experiences, moods, feelings and hopes of

69 Chögyam Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom and the Way of Meditation* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), p. 104.

70 'The reader [...] causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections.' Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 278.

each reader. It is as if the reader is invited to shape a message into a coherent whole by assembling a jumble of jigsaw pieces from the text and his reactions to it: this reading will have a meaning, but it will differ from the jigsaw compiled by another reader, who adds his own pieces to the mix. Also, the same reader produces a different reading of the same text on another occasion, because the reader is in effect not the same person as before.

On one level this echoes Buddhist thinking, as it rules out retrieving a fixed, absolute or 'true' meaning from a text. There is not a trail of clues which the reader has to follow to find the 'correct' interpretation. The notion of such variations in readings agrees with the Buddhist idea of impermanence, but it stumbles over the obstacle of not-self. This idea of the act of reading, despite the inherent 'play' and infinite possibilities, still constitutes a technique designed to extract a 'meaning' from the text, which is unique and not repeatable. It is as if the text holds access to a treasure chest of meaning, but each reading produces a different combination, each of which in turn can open the lock, but to a different meaning each time. Iser's ideas about reading wrest 'control' of meaning away from the author and the text and give it to the reader. This suits the Judaeo-Christian support for the primacy of the self, as the power to interpret resides within the individual reader.

This leads to the question whether it is possible to read a text from a Buddhist viewpoint, and how this would be achieved. In his work *Reading Emptiness*, Jeff Humphries claims that a Buddhist theory of literature is not possible, because that would be tantamount to making 'a philosophical view out of emptiness'.⁷¹ Humphries explains how – historically and until the present day – Buddhist schools have tended to over-emphasise concerns about

71 Jeff Humphries, *Reading Emptiness* (New York: SUNY, 1999), p. xi.

the reader wishing to gain something from engagement with literature, whilst maintaining that texts could hold no meaning.

Despite Buddhist scepticism towards literature, however, Humphries argues that reading and writing can facilitate insight into the ultimate Buddhist goal of knowing emptiness. He maintains that the practice of literature could provide the most efficient method available in the West for realising enlightenment, by revealing the illusions inherent in all human activity undertaken in the name of the self, in the 'provisional' world of appearances: 'The greatest potential in human being is its plasticity. [...] Literature and Buddhism have in common that both recognize and embrace this plasticity.'⁷² Humphries shows how experiencing 'emptiness' through reading can be salutary rather than depressing, as literature opens up a window on the general and impersonal truth of reality, rather than capturing specific, localised events.

One technique applied in the teaching of Buddhism could serve as a way of reading. 'Skillful means' (or *upaya kusala*) is a term to denote the idea that 'the Buddha skillfully adapted his teaching to the level of his audience'.⁷³ One oft-cited example is the parable of the burning house, where a man rescues his children from a fire by telling them of wonderful toys waiting for them outside the house. The story shows that 'what seems to be lying is not lying' because it is done 'for the sake of beings that are trapped in a dangerous situation without knowing that they are in danger'.⁷⁴

Mahayana Buddhists took this concept further, employing 'skillful means' as a 'radical hermeneutic device' exhibiting an awareness of 'a gap

⁷² Humphries, pp. xxi-xxii.

⁷³ Asaf Federman, 'Literal Means and Hidden Meanings: A New Analysis of Skillful Means' in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol 59, No. 2 (Apr 2009), p. 125.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 132.

between what texts literally say and their hidden meaning'.⁷⁵ Since nirvana is a state empty of defining characteristics and beyond intellectual reasoning, the Buddhist master has to resort to unorthodox methods to edge people towards enlightenment. The 'false and unreal devices' chosen for this purpose are 'fictions' which can later be discarded, once they have proved their effectiveness.⁷⁶ 'Skillful means' thus demonstrate how it is possible to 'become enlightened by way of fiction, that is, how to approach truth by way of fiction'.⁷⁷ In this context Zen master Linji can declare 'no Buddha, no Dharma, no Nirvana, and no Enlightenment', and claim that his teachings do not have 'a particle of Dharma to give anyone'.⁷⁸ His skillful means do not attempt to explain the laws of causality or analyse human nature, but ask us to reflect on 'how attachment to Buddhism gets in the way of liberation'.⁷⁹

Adopting a similar approach, the paradoxes and contradictions in Kafka's work can be read 'skillfully' in that they invite the reader to let go of attachments, and the trials and tribulations of Kafka's protagonists can be viewed as the inevitable consequences of an 'unskillful' dependency on self. The enlightened reader should maintain an ever-open mind, careful to stave off closure, keeping the moment/text open and not allowing 'meaning' to settle or reify. The reader searching for 'facts', 'truths' or 'views' will find plenty of instances, but they will all turn to dust once they are taken out of the context of the text and applied extra-textually.

As a result, reading as a Buddhist becomes a balancing act demanding fluidity and sacrifice. On the one hand, readers have to 'make sense' of the text inasmuch as they have to interpret the language used, make connections

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

⁷⁶ Lene Bech, 'Fiction That Leads to Truth: "The Story of the Stone" as Skillful Means' in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, Vol 26 (Jan 2004), p. 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁸ John Schroeder, 'Nagarjuna and the Doctrine of "Skillful Means"' in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol 50, No. 4 (Oct 2000), p. 576.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 575.

between thoughts, follow logic and arguments, and 'decode' a message in order to arrive at a given significance. This, as has been pointed out by many critics, not least from deconstructionist circles, is a notoriously difficult thing to do since the 'keys' to the codes are not centrally agreed or binding.

On the other hand, Buddhist readers must also remain mindful of the essential emptiness of words and instability of meaning. At best, a 'provisional', 'partial' meaning can be derived from a text, and this explains why the shifting views and stances that are put forward in Kafka's work are amenable to a 'skillful' Buddhist reading, but result in negative interpretations when viewed from a 'self-centric' position. In a formulation which suggests a degree of affinity between some post-structuralism positions and a Buddhist one, Hélène Cixous talks of the Kafkaesque impasse of 'I do not know myself, I do not know you and you do not know me', but this is not a tragic circumstance. Although it is hard to tell a story if 'in the place of truth, there is no law that decides', that is not the end of the story: 'Here truth begins'.⁸⁰

Chung-Ying Cheng offers two ways to deal with Zen paradoxes (ontological reduction and ontological substitution) and these can be applied to passages in Kafka's work that often draw declarations of defeat or victory, but could be seen as transcendent, hinting at a realm beyond duality. The first case arises with the 'ontological insight into a reality to which no ontological commitment can be made', and the response is to remain silent.⁸¹ In *Das Schloß* then, K.'s blank reaction to Bürgel's offer can be taken as an enlightened rejection of his Castle quest, rather than bafflement or indifference. In the other case, understanding can be shown through

80 Hélène Cixous, *Readings: the poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector, and Tsvetayeva* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 75.

81 Chung-Ying Cheng, 'On Zen (Ch'an) Language and Zen Paradoxes' in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol 1 (1973), p. 94.

‘presentation of a totally different and irrelevant semantic context’.⁸² In *Der Proceß*, Titorelli’s convoluted presentation of release options can be seen as Zen responses to Josef K.’s queries relating to innocence.

1.2.3 Methodology

*The path of awakening is not about positive emotions. On the contrary, enlightenment may not be easy or positive at all.*⁸³

These two routes towards a Buddhist interpretation of Kafka, focusing on content and delivery, can be summarised using terms coined by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things With Words*.⁸⁴ Austin looks at what the word carries in terms of meaning (illocution as explanation or message), but realises that meaning is deceptive and the word can actually just be something on which an action is based (perlocution as performance, effect). Broadly speaking, an illocutionary utterance is performed *in* saying something (such as giving information, in the manner of an aphoristic ‘truth’), whereas a perlocutionary speech act is performed *by* saying something (such as giving reassurance).

Though Austin uses these terms in a linguistic context, they can be applied to discussions on literature and philosophical expression. Henry Rosemont Jr uses the notions of illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts to arrive at an appreciation of Zen koans and mondos, which are aphoristic in appearance, but do not carry a ‘pith’ or kern of meaning. Zen masters use koans to manoeuvre the listening novice into a mental cul-de-sac where they can no longer think logically because the utterance contains conflicting or confusing elements. Rosemont concludes that the koan and mondo are perlocutionary in nature, because it is the intent of the Zen master to elicit a particular response from his student which has little to do with the content of

⁸² Ibid., p. 94.

⁸³ Adyashanti in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/genuine-path-awakening.

⁸⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

his words: 'This intent does not have an ordinary Judaeo-Christian equivalent, for the master uses such sentences literally to shock his students out of their conceptual schema.'⁸⁵

In this dissertation I will adapt the terms used by Austin and Rosemont Jr to guide my method of approaching Kafka's work. In the first place I will consider the illocutionary impact of his texts by looking at their content to discern the potential 'meaning'; secondly, I will consider the perlocutionary impact of Kafka's writing by looking at how the form of expression affects the reader, in the same way that koans carry a 'punch' rather than a 'message'.

The correlations between Kafka and Buddhism (Zen in particular) are at their strongest when looking at the perlocutionary effects of their utterances. The similarities represent more than a veneer of resemblance, and indicate a profound kinship of spirit and a significant overlap in philosophical outlook. The call to mindfulness is embodied in all Zen koans, and the theme of awakening is a consistent feature in Kafka's work, noticeably from *Der Proceß* onwards, transforming his depiction of human misery from a lament of unjust suffering into an indictment of misguided attachment.

Zen dovetails well with Kafka's fiction because it challenges the features which appear highly problematic when reading from Western-based viewpoints. Concepts such as 'mind', 'authority' and 'purpose' are life-defining for many Western philosophies, but for Zen they all represent frequent stumbling blocks on the path to freedom, as outlined by The Three Universal Characteristics of not-self, impermanence and suffering. 'Mind', or thinking, is invariably a product of the self, its organ of expression; 'authority' suggests a reliance on order or direction; 'purpose' indicates an attachment to a goal, such as happiness, power or knowledge. In Kafka's work, these three ideas are

⁸⁵ Rosemont Jr., p. 117.

all called into question, which is bound to render his literature 'dark' when seen from a non-Buddhist standpoint.

Zen seeks to induce enlightenment by whatever means possible, violent if necessary, but without using the tools of reason and reflection, or any other common conventions such as language. This creates many difficulties, as language is needed to communicate at a basic level. However, the key to Zen is its refusal to attach – it uses and abuses language at the same time by twisting logic and reason inside out in order to help its followers see the futility of attachments, producing 'a cul-de-sac in the thinking mind'.⁸⁶ Hence, Zen does not attempt to be intelligible, but targets the gap between an intellectual and an intuitive contact with reality: 'The method of Zen is to baffle, excite, puzzle and exhaust the intellect until it is realised that intellection is only thinking *about*' (author's italics).⁸⁷

It is in this unforgiving maelstrom of unclear meanings and dashed hopes that Zen and Kafka meet, united in the same cause – opening a path to understanding that suffering is caused by attachment. It hurts when the fiction of absolute selfhood is exposed, and this pain marks the common ground between Kafka and Buddhism. Typical Judaeo-Christian viewpoints would mourn the passing of the self, but the Buddhist perspective celebrates the disappearance of a false division.

For the above reasons, drawing on the general tenets of Buddhist thinking and the specific designs of Zen techniques, it is possible to transform perceptions of the Kafkaesque by portraying suffering as the result of attachment to self. This revised approach firstly seeks to 're-present' Kafka's texts through their thematic content whenever characterisation and subject matter map against Buddhist philosophical concepts; secondly, it seeks to

86 Christmas Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism* (London: Diamond Books, 1996), p. 87.

87 Humphreys quotes Alan Watts in *Zen Buddhism*, p. 80.

‘defuse’ the impact of paradox in the same way Zen koans can help readers relax their attachments to illusory principles.

From a Buddhist perspective, these two approaches can complement each other. Such an arrangement works in Kafka’s literature, as suggested coincidentally by Steven Davis when offering examples of illocutionary acts: ‘*appointing someone to a position*, vetoing a motion, and *finding someone guilty or innocent*’ (my italics).⁸⁸ As Davis explains, when it is not enough simply to be understood and we want to bring about certain effects on the thoughts or actions of our hearers (such as an awakening), then ‘our purpose in bringing these about is the point or purpose of our communicating and the achieving of our purpose is the performance of a perlocutionary act’. These comments summarise how to read Kafka in a less negative light. The acts of ‘appointing someone as land surveyor’ and ‘finding someone guilty’ may fall short as illocutionary acts because the ‘information’ does not seem to tally with the ‘evidence’; as perlocutionary acts, however, their purpose is to induce the realisation that attachment to self will result in suffering.

Before proceeding to a Buddhist interpretation of Kafka’s texts, the next chapter sets out in more detail the Buddhist ideas that find resonance in Kafka’s work and show the clearest contrast with Western thinking. As indicated above, two approaches will be followed; the illocutionary route will assume that there is a ‘sense’ to the writing and compare narrative descriptions with key Buddhist doctrines for signs of agreement; the perlocutionary approach offers a complementary line of investigation, by assuming that the passages resistant to a ‘sensible’ reading are purposefully obscure, offering an alternative route to awareness of emptiness (*sunyata*).

⁸⁸ Steven Davis, ‘Perlocutions’ in *Linguistics and Philosophy*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (1979), p. 233.

Chapter 2 Tightropes and tripwires

2.1 The text as a tightrope

*Once our minds have constructed the notion of 'I', it becomes our central reference point. We attach to it and identify with it totally. We attempt to advance what appear to be its interests, to defend it against real or apparent threats and menaces. And we look for ego-affirmation at every turn: confirmation that we exist and are valued.*⁸⁹

There are probably as many routes into Kafka's works as there have been commentators on them, as each will have pieced together a different 'jigsaw' of their significance. Much like the man from the country sitting outside his door to the law, readers looking to gain access to Kafka's writing will have their own point of entry, and it will be the right one for them. In other words, many solutions can claim to address the issues raised by Kafka, and hence caution must be exercised when taking an intellectual approach to the text: the bewildering array of potential readings turns each into a tightrope.

Buddhist philosophy works on the basis that personal attachments block awakening to the nature of existence, and this thesis will argue that the suffering and frustrations presented in Kafka's works are the result of ignorance in the individual, a condition which is treatable and not terminal. The sections below explain key Buddhist ideas in more detail, from The Three Universal Characteristics and The Four Noble Truths, to Dependent Origination and awakening. Kafka's writing will be referred to throughout to illustrate areas of correlation, with closer textual readings following in chapters three to six.

⁸⁹ John Snelling in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/not-self-0.

2.1.1 The Three Universal Characteristics

*Through the understanding of impermanence, suffering, and notself, we will have freed ourselves of the fundamental errors that imprison us within the cycle of birth and death – the error of seeing things as permanent, the error of seeing things as pleasant and the error of seeing things as self.*⁹⁰

The bedrock of Buddhism is formed by The Three Universal Characteristics, which set out the conditions relating to the nature of existence: *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering) and *anatta* (not-self). This teaching shows how the universe works, exposing the illusions and delusions which cloud our perception of the world.

First, impermanence stresses the ever-changing nature of existence, which applies to all things without exception. This transience can be manifested in many ways: in time (which never halts); in composition (the ‘whole’ is made up of a number of constituent parts); in relativity (good and bad do not exist as absolutes, for they are defined relative to each other); and in names (they are convenient labels designated by human beings to help define things and distinguish between them).

Second, *dukkha* has a broader meaning than the English ‘suffering’, as it also encompasses incompleteness, unsatisfactoriness and imperfection. Suffering takes many guises: birth, old age, disease, death, not getting what one wants, worrying about losing what one has.

Third, the truth of not-self in Buddhism rejects the belief in a real, fixed, independent, permanent entity that is represented by ‘I’. The self is a convenient name for a collection of factors which are ever-changing, interdependent, impermanent physical and mental experiences, such as feelings, ideas, thoughts, habits, attitudes. The compelling presence of the self

⁹⁰ Peter D. Santina, *Fundamentals of Buddhism* (Singapore: Buddha Dharma Education Association, 1984), p. 124.

has been likened to a flame, a constant source of energy in an apparently constant form: 'Actually there is no I existing as some substantial thing; there is only the ceaseless flow. [...] That there is this seemingly fixed form based on various conditions is interdependence.'⁹¹

Buddhism rejects the idea of a fixed self because it causes greed, anger, illusion, pride and prejudice. If we equate self with existence, then without it we cease properly or meaningfully to exist, and must therefore protect it from attack at all costs. However, we set ourselves a perpetual task, for the ever-vulnerable self demands constant attention. If we realise that the 'I' we wake up to, dress, and take to work is nothing more than a useful means of carrying the volatile mix of thoughts and emotions that run through our body and mind, we can eliminate at a stroke the delusions of the self and its attendant suffering.

To the newcomer, these three core characteristics may have an unsettling preoccupation with misery and lack. Rather than sketch a picture of future heavenly bliss, Buddhism insists first on a realisation of life's present dissatisfactions, and Kafka's fiction reveals a similar focus. Taken in isolation, this stance would appear pessimistic, but it would be unfair to judge Buddhism (or Kafka) purely on an opening position. Rather than shield human beings from the harsh facts of life, Buddhist teaching takes the view that it is better in the long run to dispel ignorance about the disconcerting truths of our existence and stress the importance of cultivating a state of mindfulness. There are undoubted parallels with Kafka, which suggests that his exploration of suffering is a means of exposing attachment and not expressing despair.

91 Kosho Uchiyama, *Opening the Hand of Thought: Foundations of Zen Buddhist Practice* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), p. 99.

In Judaeo-Christian systems of thought, for example, there is room for (perhaps even a need of) something absolute and enduring, and this can assume many forms, such as God (representing salvation, authority), justice (order), good and evil (meaning), freedom and selfhood (independence). These absolutes have varied in their manifestation and relative importance across the ages; nevertheless, they have assumed defining roles in the modern human condition. Impermanence is a threat for it undermines stability, order and meaning. For Buddhists, it is an equally uncomfortable proposition, but the problem lies in how we approach it, and not how we define it: the stronger our attachment, the deeper the suffering. Kafka's tortured heroes resist impermanence and suffer the consequences.

In the case of 'justice', for example as experienced by Josef K., it is not important whether the notion is real and attainable, or theoretical and illusory; what assumes importance is when the individual takes a rigid stance towards the subject, which then impacts his own existence. For example, a person could (a) have implicit trust in justice, (b) have no faith in the law but struggle for personal justice, or (c) have no concern for justice at all; this would appear to 'produce' three different people, a law-abiding citizen, a dissident, or an outlaw, but they are all 'similar' in that they have taken a stance (defined themselves) in regards to justice. In a Buddhist sense, the enlightened individual will see how justice is a conventional truth not an ultimate truth: faith in (or pursuit of) justice is a personal trait which adds local colour to the matrix of the self, but creates nothing enduring. Becoming aware of the distinction between conventional and ultimate reality helps advance a 'skillful' interpretation of Kafka's work: the suffering undergone by human beings can be attributed to their own ordinary delusions rather than the extraordinary interference of others.

Supported by the law of impermanence, the Buddhist teaching on not-self states that there is in reality no fixed, absolute self, but it does not mean that the 'I-me-mine' that we refer to every day is illusory. It is a real, but 'provisional' self, a network of cells, thoughts and motivations, wrapped in a recognisable shell, and perishable nonetheless. It exists as a convention or a convenient invention, something created rather than absolute. An enlightened person would be aware of two levels of truth when looking in the mirror: the initial glance at the face staring back reflects the momentary focus of all the elements (or 'aggregates') that make up our person, but more profound contemplation would see through the reflected image and acknowledge the underlying lack of essence, the reality of emptiness.⁹²

Selfhood is important within the confines of conventional reality, but this supremacy does not seep across into ultimate reality. The self is a link in a chain like any other, even if it is more complex and with more connections: awareness of this dependency on other events and influences reveals the underlying emptiness, which is accessible now and at any time for those with the right insight.⁹³

Given the prominence of suffering in Kafka's work, it is important to note the distinction in these perspectives. The Buddhist view regards suffering as a consequence of birth, and the symptom of a cognitive failure to transcend the illusion of essentiality. Suffering is inevitable, but our relationship to it is not. Seen against this backdrop, the problems faced by Josef K., for example, take on a completely different aspect. To the Judaeo-Christian eye, the arrest-without-charge and shadowy Court are the mysterious sources of K.'s malaise which are difficult to combat, and hence his demise is felt to be unjust and meaningless. The Buddhist reader is more likely to observe K.'s suffering and

92 A useful background to these ideas can be found in Guy Newland's *Introduction to Emptiness* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2008).

93 This idea is addressed further in chapter two, under the law of Dependent Origination.

wonder to what extent his limited understanding of the world has contributed to this sad state of affairs.

Buddhism's uncompromising stance on not-self and impermanence is reflected in the Buddha's exhortations to test authority and accept nothing as 'given'. A theistic view of selfhood would struggle to accommodate such fluidity because the self is in effect divine property and must have some fixed elements, configured in accordance with predetermined values. Philosophies with no place for God, on the other hand, would not baulk at seizing (what used to be seen as) divine property, and asserting the freedom and independence of the individual. However, the point could be made that whether it is maintained in the name of God or occupied by existential squatters, the edifice of selfhood remains as a point of reference and it is attachment to this that contrasts with Buddhist thinking.

The matter of personal identity is treated differently in Western and Buddhist thinking and these variations in outlook result in divergent readings of Kafka's work. Whether secular or religious in nature, Western traditions tend to stress the significance of the self. Where belief in a creator exists, death and passage into heaven does not eclipse the primary status of the self, for union with God will bring untold bliss to the individual – paradise is there to be enjoyed as a reward. In the absence of God, the existentialist self, for example, fills the void with its own importance, whereas the deconstructed self still retains an influential role from its position on the sidelines. Typically, the Western self is an entity to be discovered, accumulated, sculpted: it is ground to be covered, knowledge to be gained, feelings to be experienced, relationships to be had, dislikes to be avoided, ambitions to be held, deeds to be done – all rolled into an ever-swelling being which amounts to 'me'.

The Buddhist view contrasts with this in its assertion that the self does not exist in any constant or absolute form. There is certainly a constantly

evolving aggregate of cells, tissues and emotions, but nothing which amounts permanently to 'me': there is no definitive core or residue. Destruction of the self is largely seen in Western eyes as abhorrent, whereas Buddhists note that it is impossible to destroy what does not exist. What should be destroyed, however, is the illusion of the self, which ironically is very real and damaging.⁹⁴

It is not by chance that K. in *Das Schloß* is a 'Landvermesser', with the 'vermessen' connection hinting at a combination of boldness, arrogance and measuring or defining (incorrectly to boot, through the prefix *ver-*). K. is a self-confident aggressor who is determined to carve out his place in the Castle-led community, by making connections, closing deals, sealing bonds. It is perhaps a trait of the Western mind that the individual bears without question this concept of integrated selfhood and its primacy: we all have some significance – however minor – and must claim our place as a piece in the universal jigsaw.

From a Buddhist viewpoint, K.'s occupation as a surveyor can be seen as an ironic commentary on a misguided attachment to the self. K. spends his time vainly attempting to 'map out' the terrain, trying to draw boundaries, seeking to make connections, striving to define the environment in which he exists. That he fails is not then simply a reflection on what he does or what he encounters, such as the elusiveness of Klamm, the indifference of the Castle itself, his own aggressive or manipulative nature, or his tactics. It is rather a reflection on the surveyor's deluded mind: failure is inevitable at the outset because in a world of flux and constant change there is neither a permanent self, nor any secure place to which to attach it. The surveyor would be better advised to put away his measuring tools and reflect on the fundamental

94 Ayya Khema's *Who is My Self?* provides a useful account of the Buddhist idea of self.

nature of reality. To his credit, K. does finally achieve some kind of understanding of the futility of his search.

Different views on the notion of identity are bound to produce divergent readings of Kafka's works. For example, a Freudian view of the hunger artist's search for the perfect fasting might conclude that his art is a manifestation of subconscious feelings of inferiority. He experiences lack, longs for nourishment, and his starving is a way of ridding himself of an unwanted existence. Possible solutions to his suffering would involve measures to find alternative nourishment: in short, to 'feed' his ego or 'boost' his sense of self. If the right food cannot be found, death will follow, and so inevitably will a gloomy interpretation of the story: how difficult it is to find the food that will nourish us. If we don't like our self, we should alter it or destroy it.

A Buddhist view would be critical of the hunger artist's tacit acceptance of a self in the first place. Any endeavour to prop up an illusory construct is doomed to failure. The reader watches as the hunger artist slides blindly and unavoidably into oblivion, noting the irony of the starving man's position – he defines his self as a 'starvation artist', so surely the clearest definition will be obtained by starving himself to the extreme. In trying to capture his 'essence' as a faster, he must keep fasting and thereby destroy this 'essence'. A more constructive reading of this story would be to point out the folly of assuming that there is a self that needs to be 'fed' or nourished.

Another important difference between Buddhist ideas and Western philosophies is the way in which the individual views his position in relation to his external surroundings. As suggested by Jerrold Seigel and Charles Taylor in the opening chapter, modern Western thought tends to assert the rights of the self, before attempting to square them off with the outer world and all its conflicts. This establishes a division between the individual and his surrounding world which is difficult to overcome. The Buddhist view tries to

dissolve the role of the self, seeing it as a fly in the universal ointment, contaminating the individual's attempts to access a pure understanding of existential reality.

God does not appear as a guiding force in Kafka's work, and other potential frameworks of authority – paternal, judicial, social – seem at best unreliable or at worst destructive. The reader is faced with an unfamiliar representation of the nature of selfhood, because the minimal description of character and environment turns the focus from the external appearance and location of his main protagonists to their inner preoccupations. It is for this reason not surprising that taking a Judaeo-Christian perspective on the self portrayed by Kafka results in a harrowing vision of human existence. Gabriel Josipovici notes the points at which self-concerns – the quest for acceptance, the battle against authority, the struggle for freedom – prepare a life of suffering: 'To be alive in Kafka's sense does not mean to exist. It means understanding one's place in the world.'⁹⁵ We try to interpret the world by using our mental faculty, but this tool is inadequate: 'The imagination, which had appeared to provide contact with some transcendental source, turns out to be only an instrument of the vanity of the self, avidly shielding the self from the reality of things.'⁹⁶

2.1.2 The Four Noble Truths

*Central to the Buddha's teaching is the doctrine of anatman: 'not-self'. This does not deny that the notion of an 'I' works in the everyday world. In fact, we need a solid, stable ego to function in society. However, 'I' is not real in an ultimate sense. It is a 'name': a fictional construct that bears no correspondence to what is really the case. Because of this disjunction all kinds of problems ensue.*⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Gabriel Josipovici, *The Lessons of Modernism and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 21.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

⁹⁷ John Snelling in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/not-self-0.

With its foundations established through The Three Universal Characteristics, the main pillars of Buddhist thinking are erected in The Four Noble Truths, which seek to show the individual how he relates to the world around him and how he can disentangle himself from suffering in it. It is at this point that Buddhism breaks free of criticisms of pessimism and plots a way forward. We need not dwell on the grim picture of the world painted by impermanence, dissatisfaction and not-self, but can consider a way of dealing with this reality. The Four Noble Truths offer a way out by (1) admitting that there is suffering, (2) identifying the cause of suffering, (3) looking towards the cessation of suffering, (4) and showing a practical path leading to the cessation of suffering.⁹⁸

The First Noble Truth states that ‘there is’ suffering, rather than ‘we’ or ‘I’ or ‘you’ suffer. The truth of the matter is presented impersonally, and this goes to the heart of Buddhism. A person ignorant of the Dharma would say, ‘I am suffering’, ‘I am upset’, ‘I am unhappy’. The ‘I’ amplifies the suffering by personalising it. Looking at suffering through the ‘I’ is tantamount to throwing oil onto a flame. The awakened person learns to starve the combustible ego of oxygen and adopt a position of reflection and objective observation.

Impermanence brings ample opportunities for suffering to arise, but it is an occasion of, rather than a cause of, suffering because it only leads to suffering when ignorance and craving are present. When we attach to pleasant feelings, often in the hope that they may be prolonged or fixed, we are bound to suffer. Failing to understand that all phenomena are impermanent is ignorance. Craving for and clinging to these phenomena are the causes of suffering. Kafka’s work is full of characters who see every setback as a

⁹⁸ Ajahn Sumedho, *The Four Noble Truths* (Hertfordshire: Amaravati Publications, 1992). This text provides a clear and concise explanation of the basic ideas of Buddhism.

personal attack, from early figures like the officer in *In der Strafkolonie*, through both K.s and on to the hunger artist.

The Second Noble Truth states that the origin of suffering is desire, which comes in various forms, such as wanting to experience sense pleasures or becoming something. Desire is present at any given moment as we hunger for nourishment, long for happiness, strive to become wealthy, or seek praise by doing good deeds. Even apparently 'selfless' actions bear the hallmarks of the self, such as wanting to do good to secure a blessing. This point is illustrated by a famous exchange when Bodhidharma, the first patriarch of Zen, met Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty: 'Wu said: "I have endowed temples and authorized ordinations – what is my merit?"' Bodhidharma's answer was radical: "No merit at all."⁹⁹ Wu's good works bore the hallmarks of attachment to selfhood, so there was no spiritual reward.

Then there is the desire to get rid of things, such as pain or misfortune. Buddhism does not maintain that it is wrong to want success or to change a job. It is rather that we should reflect on why the 'I' needs to have or be something, on the clash between internal wishes and external limits: 'The real cause of our suffering is the unrealistic desire, not the reality that frustrates it. The real cause of the economic problem is not the absence of means to satisfy our endless wants, but the presence of these insatiable wants.'¹⁰⁰ Given the spiritual chain of demand-and-supply, the shortfall is addressed by reducing demand, not increasing supply: 'We have to awaken from our world of dreams and come down to reality, to face and accept reality as it is.'¹⁰¹

The Third Noble Truth concerns the cessation of suffering and aims to develop further the reflective mind in order to let go of delusions. Out of

99 Jisho Cary Warner in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/onpractice/snaggletoothed-barbarian.

100 Rahula Yogavacara Bhikkhu, *The Way to Peace and Happiness* (Bangkok: Duang Kamol, 1996), p. 16.

101 Ibid., p. 16.

ignorance, we attach to desires for sense pleasures and, in doing so, we effectively pursue something which will perish. We pretend that we are going to be happy with the things we attach to, only later to feel disillusioned when they are gone. We might succeed in becoming what we want, but that too is temporary as we then turn to another ambition to fill the void. Finally, the desire to be released from life, craving suicide or annihilation, is a mortal or death-bound condition and such desires bring despair.

To cease suffering we have to break the perpetual cycle of ‘wanting’.¹⁰² For example, the desire for love is a basic human urge which causes both the greatest happiness and sadness in human life. This is no paradox, however, for there is nothing inherently ‘wrong’ with love that makes it turn from good to bad. It is rather the degree of human attachment to it which determines whether love is the cause of pleasure or pain. Once the object of desire is lost, the self feels its attachment and does not want to be separated from the thing which has become a part of its identity. As the self asserts itself, want is born: this is ‘becoming’ driven by desire and in our ignorance we are caught in this becoming process through all our senses. But through knowing desire for what it is rather than what it means for ‘us’, by seeing with the ‘eye’ rather than with the ‘I’, we can avoid grasping at it, and thus we can experience the cessation of suffering.

The Fourth Noble Truth shows how we can achieve cessation by following The Eightfold Path. It covers the ways in which we think and act, namely Right Understanding and Right Aspiration, grouped together as wisdom; then there follow three moral elements in Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood; finally come Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, which together form heart or spirit.

102 Seung Sahn dedicates a book to this point: *Wanting Enlightenment is a Big Mistake* (Boston: Shambhala, 2006).

Right Understanding teaches how to use intelligence for reflection and contemplation, that is, how to think with discrimination rather than with ignorance – this is something few of Kafka's characters are endowed with. Right Aspiration is doing things with the right attitude or intention. Josef K. is a good example of failings in this area, as he consistently acts out of selfish motives. Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood place an emphasis on being responsible for what we say and do, because inappropriate words and imprudent deeds cause pain, anguish and anger. If you see someone fall over and go to help them, and do so out of compassion, it is a skillful action and is empty of selfhood. However, if you act out of expectation of some reward for your action, then self is involved, even though you are doing a good deed. Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration are concerned with how to achieve balance, harmony and serenity in our actions. Serenity is in short supply in Kafka, but significant outbreaks of contentedness appear towards the end of his work, as exemplified by post-Bürger K., and the narrators from *Eine kleine Frau* and *Josefine*.

Broadly speaking, Western thought is concerned with the destination, while Zen keeps interrupting the trip. Kafka's texts often have no clear resolution, and readers may feel the narratives lead them 'down the garden path', but this perception may derive from the desire to complete the journey. Once we stop thinking about a goal, the labyrinth ceases to confound and reverts to being a path, albeit a circuitous one. Similarly, we could choose to interpret in a negative way the apparently vicious cycle of frustration which torments K. in *Das Schloß*. Whatever steps he takes, he always seems to be out of reach of his goal, somewhat like the road he walks along which skirts around the Castle, but never gets any nearer. If we assume that access to the Castle is a real, viable and worthy goal, then K. appears to be condemned to circle around the dead-ends and blind alleys down in the village. If we are

sympathetic to K., we could read his misfortune as the result of a cruel or indifferent authority; if we are critical of K.'s behaviour, his failure to 'arrive' at the destination is down to his personal shortcomings. In any of these scenarios, the assumption is that there is nothing wrong in considering access to the Castle as a sensible goal. However, if we assume that the endpoint is an illusion, a figment of K.'s deluded egotistical desires, then his meanderings become an indictment of his stubborn ignorance. Speculation about the Castle's powers and significance amounts to a projection of what K. lacks, what his ego needs to 'complete' itself.

The Buddhist view of how lives unfold is cyclical, rather than linear, which means the burden of escaping from suffering is carried by the individual.¹⁰³ For a Buddhist there is no 'final reckoning', but an unbroken journey through revolutions of birth, death and rebirth, driven by the forces of karmic energy accumulated through craving and attachments. Failure to attain nirvana during any lifetime is never damning, since there is always another life (however this is to be understood) in which progress can be made. Efforts to lessen the effects of karma bring rebirth with an 'upward' momentum into 'higher' realms, bringing conditions more conducive to developing understanding. Ultimate release from the cycle comes with a complete mental and spiritual realisation of the truth of the Dharma.

These conflicting perspectives on how life develops will inevitably return different readings of certain happenings in Kafka's writing. From a Judaeo-Christian perspective, for example, Josef K.'s death could be seen as tragic. Despite the sinister aspect of the Court, K. has failed to come up to scratch in life and is sentenced to a grisly end. The fairness of the verdict is debatable, and readers might speculate as to whether an innocent or ignorant K. did not

103 Walpola Rahula covers the notion of the 'cycle of continuity' (*samsara*) in *What the Buddha Taught* (London: Wisdom Books, 1990), p. 27.

understand the arrest/test, or whether the arrest/test was too harsh. But the feeling remains that K.'s failure could happen to anybody, and an inevitably pessimistic pall hangs over the novel.

From a Buddhist perspective, Josef K.'s death is just the last chapter in the book, but not the end of the series. There is a failure, but it is not final, and can be attributed to K.'s ignorance. It will bring consequences (the Buddhist concept of karma), but hell does not await K. because there is no soul to damn. K.'s frantic stabs at fending off the accusation of guilt might serve as a wake-up call to any individuals prone to similar delusions about their innocent lives. K.'s life (and death) was bleak, but ours need not be.

2.1.3 The Law of Dependent Origination

*Shakyamuni Buddha taught that all material things are subject to laws. Birth, old age, sickness, and death are laws in themselves, and not problems that have to be solved through the power of human beings or through some other power. There is no 'good' and 'bad' in laws. Only through the intervention of people's views does this notion of 'good' and 'bad' arise.*¹⁰⁴

Suffering is central to Buddhist thinking, and it also seeps into every corner of Kafka's writing. To the Christian mind, suffering is a problem, an anomaly, perhaps a punishment. If it does not square up with the notion of a just and benevolent god, suffering needs to be explained in other ways, such as being self-inflicted or the price of future happiness. To the Buddhist disposition, suffering is equally unwelcome, but natural and inevitable, made worse by personal resistance.¹⁰⁵ The First Noble Truth declares the reality of suffering and goes on to suggest that it is our 'ownership' that causes pain.

104 Sekkei Roshi in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/law-all-things.

105 'The suffering itself is not so bad, it's the resentment against suffering that is the real pain.' Allen Ginsberg, *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/fear-first-noble-truth.

The mechanics of ownership are set forth in *paticcasamuppada*, the Law of Dependent Origination.¹⁰⁶ This is the glue that holds Buddhist thought together because it blends the realities of The Three Universal Characteristics (not-self, suffering, impermanence) with the practicalities of The Four Noble Truths. In essence, this doctrine holds that ‘because there is this, there is that; because this is not, that is not’. It shows how suffering arises and ceases, due to an interdependence of a number of natural factors, with no place for a god or creator pulling strings. There is no room for an autonomous self in *paticcasamuppada*: there is an unbroken flow of interconnected arising and ceasing, which we mistakenly hive off into chunks, preserve and rename ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘me’, and so forth. It is unsettling to hear that this flow of phenomena does not contain a fixed ‘me’ anywhere, but uplifting to know that the stream can be channelled into different directions. Dependent Origination is not fate or determinism, and although it would be wrong to suggest that we can simply become anything we want to, we have the power to encourage ‘good’ and prevent ‘evil’, once we understand how things arise and cease.

This doctrine is of fundamental importance to Buddhism for it is the means of opening people’s eyes to the fact that craving and ignorant attachment to selfhood block release from suffering: ‘Every time there is sense contact without wisdom concerning liberation, there will be becoming (*bhava*) and birth (*jati*). To put it another way: when there is only ignorance present at the point of sense contact, the Law of Dependent Origination is put into motion.’¹⁰⁷ If you take the example of a farmer, toiling in the fields under a blazing sun, he might stop for a moment, wipe the sweat from his brow and exclaim, ‘Oh, I’m so hot!’. If there is no clinging in this cry, then the suffering

106 *Paticca* means ‘grounded on, concerning, because’ and *samuppada* means ‘origin, arising, genesis, coming to be, production’. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Paticcasamuppada: Practical Dependent Origination* (Nonthaburi: Vuddhidhamma Fund, 1992), p. 24.

107 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

is a simple, natural reaction. If the exclamation is shot through with a sense of self, 'my' suffering, why am 'I' so hot, why should 'I' have such a difficult life, why is this happening to 'me', then this dissatisfaction amounts to suffering according to the law of *paticcasamuppada*.

It is worth observing the process that unfolds after making contact with an object and experiencing unsatisfactory consequences, and noting how closely it fits with the way Kafka's characters live their deluded lives. First, there is ignorance relating to the truth about suffering, impermanence and lack of selfhood, and this gives rise to mental formulations which reveal the way we express ourselves, through body, speech and thought. Thereupon follows consciousness, in six forms: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. These forms of consciousness give rise to mentality/materiality in the form of feelings, perceptions and physical elements, which in turn give rise to the six sense bases corresponding to the six kinds of consciousness. The senses lead to contact, which in turn engenders feeling, and then craving. From craving arises attachment, which can be to the senses, to views, to rituals, and to the 'I' concept, whereupon arise becoming, birth, decay, death, rebirth, all in a perpetual cycle.¹⁰⁸

Rebirth in Western thought tends to refer to the final passage of the self (or soul) to a form of afterlife, and the heavenly or hellish nature of the resting place depends on the judgment passed by the controlling authority (e.g. God). In Buddhism rebirth simply indicates another turn on the Wheel of Samsara, the continuity of existence which can only be stopped through wisdom.¹⁰⁹ Nagapriya explains that the terms '(re)birth' and 'becoming' should be

¹⁰⁸ Buddhadasa lists the eleven steps in the chain of causation in his study, *Paticcasamuppada*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁹ 'The process of birth, death and rebirth (*samsara*) is said to continue indefinitely until we become spiritually liberated.' Nagapriya, *Exploring Karma and Rebirth* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 2004), p. 15. Nagapriya's account of dependent origination, karma and rebirth is particularly lucid.

understood in their context, for they need not refer to a physical birth from a womb, but could indicate the birth or arising of the ego, the 'I' concept. He points out that such a view is not even metaphorical, but a literal account of how want and desire are born, the arising of the ego. One turn of the cycle of dependent origination from ignorance through sense contact, attachment and birth, may take moments, and not necessarily years or a lifetime.¹¹⁰ When the Buddha achieved enlightenment, it is said that he was able to recall all his thousands of past lives and rebirths, which could be understood to mean that he was able to recollect all the instances in which his ego had asserted itself in the presence of ignorance, thereby conditioning further I-rebirths.

This is relevant to a study of Kafka because it demonstrates how suffering is linked inextricably with attachment to selfhood: pursuit of or maintenance of the illusion of the ego can only result in dissatisfaction. All of Kafka's characters succumb to the delusion of fixed selfhood, and in their attachments and cravings suffering is the natural outcome. At the point of his arrest, Josef K. has not 'awoken' to reality, despite the fact of his physical awakening, and he can be said to undergo the following turn of the cycle of dependent origination: owing to his ignorance, and clinging to a threatened self, he experiences fear and anger at the news of his 'Verhaftung'; he (his identity, his existence) is perceived to be in danger. In Buddhist terms, ear contact (hearing the announcement) causes feeling, craving and attachment: 'I am innocent!', 'Why is this happening to me?'. This is suffering arising and the birth of the 'I' concept.

By way of contrast, the single outstanding figure who manages to escape from this entanglement is K. post-Bürgel, after he has relinquished his claims for Castle recognition. The calm, unperturbed figure at the end of the novel is

¹¹⁰ This view is supported by Buddhadasa: 'In just one moment, a complete cycle of *Paticcasamuppada* can roll on.' *Paticcasamuppada*, p. 31.

not an oddity, but an enlightened person, on the path to understanding what Josef K. was hostage to: how the all-consuming thirst of the self for existence drives a perpetual cycle of suffering.

To adapt the much-quoted Cartesian formula, the law of dependent origination is rather like, 'I think therefore I become'. With wrong view, every birth of the 'I' will engender suffering of some description. With right view, the self can be seen for what it is: an aggregate of feelings and thoughts, tissues and cells, which is continuously evolving. Like wading into a river and trying to snatch at the current, any attempt at clutching at selfhood is doomed to failure, to suffering. This may explain the sense of gloom in Kafka's work, but the key to a brighter view is to see through attachment, as shown by enlightened K. after relinquishing his quest. With *paticcasamuppada*, nothing is random because everything has a cause, even though we may not see it.

An important component in dependent origination is karma, the Sanskrit term for 'action', which gives each individual the means to determine to a certain degree the direction his life takes. Put very loosely, the law of karma states that past actions condition present experience, and present actions condition future experience. It should also be noted that 'actions' include 'thoughts', and the mental attitude or volition which motivates an action can be as significant as the action itself. It is in this respect that karma is of use in reading Kafka, for the internal, mental disposition of his characters can be explored as a means of understanding their situation, rather than trying to analyse the composition of external elements in their lives, such as courts or castles.

Karma is of huge importance to Buddhist thought because it both ties down and liberates. It ties down in the sense that it is an impersonal, incorruptible law that unfolds in a natural process. It is inflexible in the respect that it cannot be bypassed or overruled, and it treats everybody

equally and impartially: hence, like the Court's Law in *Der Proceß*, it is infallible. It is also liberating, however, in that it helps us to transform who we are, because it empowers us by bestowing a force on all of our actions. We can work towards shaping our world by understanding that our willed actions have effects, and that by taking responsibility for these consequences we are in some measure creating our future.

The essence of karma is intention, and this covers will, choice and decision. Intention is manifested through thought, speech and deed, and it will have its effects, however small or fleeting the instance may seem: 'All kamma, whether good or evil, bears fruit. There is no kamma, no matter how small, which is void of fruit.'¹¹¹ Karma can be unskillful (*akusala*) or skillful (*kusala*). Unskillful actions are born of greed, hatred and delusion; skillful actions are born of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. Karma that is channelled through the mind is considered to be the most significant, as deeds and speech are derived from mental action. Mental karma can be divided into different aspects and one of the most important of these is *dithi* – beliefs or views. The Buddha spoke of wrong view as a harmful condition because it influences subsequent actions, expressed verbally, bodily or mentally: 'Monks! I see no other condition which is so harmful as wrong view. Of harmful things, monks, wrong view is the greatest.'¹¹²

An essential part of the teaching of karma is rebirth, for it is important to allow time for the consequences of our actions to bear fruit. If we consider our time is up after one life, we may despair that an unskillful life will lead to eternal punishment in hell, or we may grow complacent that a skillful life will bring rewards. However, as explained in the doctrine of dependent origination,

111 P. A. Payutto Bhikkhu, *Good, Evil and Beyond: Kamma in the Buddha's Teaching* (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1993), p. 8. It follows that an act which is without intention has no karma.

112 Ibid., p. 16.

there is in the here-and-now a never-ending roll of 'births' every time we will the ego into existence with our cravings and attachments. Buddhism explains how the seeds of our actions will sprout in later existences, in one form or another, so we should remain ever-vigilant of our conduct. No matter how desperate our situation, there is always the prospect that suffering can be eradicated in the longer term by cultivating better understanding and banishing the urges of the ego.

Karma is often misunderstood as a fatalistic law of cause and effect, attributable to three main misperceptions.¹¹³ In the first instance, the law of karma is seen as a rule which governs every aspect of existence, a kind of comprehensive universal principle. This is not the case, for Buddhists use the concept of dependent origination to refer to the principle which proposes that all things arise and fall in dependence on conditions, which means that there are no constant, permanent entities in the universe. The law of karma is one strand in the wider teaching of dependent origination, and its scope is limited to the sphere of actions created by volition: karma has never caused an earthquake.

In the second instance, karma may be viewed as a principle which preserves the balance of good and evil in the universe. In other words, if I commit some evil, then something bad will later happen to me to 'even things up'. This suggests an almost mechanical operation of 'payback', but such a view might be unhelpful because it can easily fall prey to the deluded expectations or fears of an ego obsessed with self-interests, that is, 'my' rewards or 'my' punishment are 'my' just desserts: the fantasy of selfhood gets reinforced in this way. This misconception tends to see karma as a force of retribution, or a kind of 'cosmic judge', weighing up all our conduct in

113 A detailed discussion on karma and how it is viewed by Western and Indian religious traditions is provided by Whitley R. P. Kaufman's 'Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil' in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Jan 2005), pp. 15-32.

accordance with unshakeable moral laws and distributing appropriate sentences. There is necessarily an element of reward and punishment to the remit of the law of karma, but there are so many other variables in play (cf. the concept of dependent origination) that it would be incorrect to treat karma as an all-seeing, omnipotent authority. Although it acts at the personal level, karma is an impersonal force, in that it takes no notice of 'who we are'. It is not intelligent, but rather a natural law of cause and effect which comes into play when actions (deeds and thoughts) are executed, and a consequent effect is born.

A further misunderstanding is to view karma as a kind of fate – whatever happens to us is pre-ordained. The problem here is that it can make the individual lazy, because the effect attributed to karma is removed from the individual's influence and placed with a supposed external entity. That would turn karma into a mystical working of the universe to which we must submit, and the danger would be that a deluded ego could divorce karma from the actions it was associated with – there would be no point in trying to fight such an irresistible force. Actually, karma is just a natural flow of cause and effect which is initiated by the actions we undertake by ourselves.¹¹⁴ We alone are responsible for our karma, so it could be said that we are judged by our own actions.

In his interpretation of *Die Verwandlung*, Michael Ryan sees karma at work in Gregor's metamorphosis into a beetle.¹¹⁵ He suggests that Gregor Samsa's surname could have been derived from the term *samsara*, indicating

¹¹⁴ 'The theory of karma is the theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction; it is a natural law, which has nothing to do with the idea of justice or reward and punishment. Every volitional action produces its effects or results. If a good action produces good effects and a bad action bad effects, it is not justice, or reward, or punishment meted out by anybody or any power sitting in judgment on your action, but this is in virtue of its own nature, its own law.' Rahula, p. 32.

¹¹⁵ Michael P. Ryan, 'Samsa and Samsara: Suffering, Death and Rebirth in *The Metamorphosis*' in *The German Quarterly*, Vol 72, No. 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 133-52.

the world of suffering we inhabit and are compelled to keep returning to in a perpetual cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth.

Ryan goes as far as to link the three stories in the *Strafen* series in a rebirth motif, where the unfortunate Georg Bendemann suffers death under the direction of his father, to be reborn as Gregor Samsa, who suffers from the strains of supporting his family, until transforming into a beetle and dying, before being reborn as the traveller visiting the penal colony, who this time undergoes no pain or punishment, but looks on as others suffer. This progression would represent a kind of development from ignorance to insight.

Ryan's application of karma and rebirth to the lifecycles of Kafka's characters appears to overstretch the teaching which is central to understanding individual growth in Buddhism. In an attempt to portray development across a series of stories, he oversimplifies the complicated and intricate concepts relating to cause and effect, and ends up grafting a mosaic of Buddhist terms onto narratives which share thematic links, but do not belong in an organic whole.

Karma in narrative action is represented more convincingly in the film *Groundhog Day* which displays an uncanny similarity with the troubles experienced by Kafka's K.s. In the story, a misanthropist weather reporter (Phil Connors) finds himself trapped in a cycle where he relives the same day over and over again.¹¹⁶ All the other people go about their business as if they are experiencing the day for the first time, but the weatherman must wake up at the same time every morning in the knowledge that the day just dawning is the same day as the one he left behind on going to sleep. He is not condemned to repeat the same actions from the day before and has the 'freedom' to act

¹¹⁶ *Groundhog Day*, directed by Harold Ramis (Columbia Pictures, 1993). The film refers to the day when, according to popular tradition, a groundhog's actions are interpreted to determine whether winter is over. The weatherman undergoes a prolonged 'winter' of his own due to the intensified effects of his increasingly selfish behaviour.

differently, but he will always go to bed knowing that the next day will again be 'Groundhog Day'. There are parallels here with both *Der Proceß* and *Das Schloß*: Josef K. wakes up to an 'arrest', and is told by one of the warders that he can go about his business as usual, but should just be a little more mindful of his actions; K. spends day after day (and all the days seem the same) trying to satisfy his quest to enter the Castle.

A Buddhist interpretation of the film would describe the weatherman's predicament as a stylised example of living in samsara, the endless round of life, death and rebirth that is driven by karmic energy from our volition-fuelled lives. It would point out how we accrue unskillful karma from all our actions which are born of ignorance and carried out in the name of our deluded egos. The weather reporter reaches a high point in selfish conduct on the first day, to the extent that he appears to trigger an exaggerated instance of samsara, where the life cycle is speeded up or concentrated into a day cycle. Connors is initially shocked to find his day repeating, but in keeping with his selfish character his first reaction is simply to satiate his ego, by drinking, carousing, chasing women and generally behaving to excess, safe in the knowledge that he will wake up the next day undamaged, without a hangover, and seemingly back at square one with all the people he had abused earlier.

Eventually, Connors (the 'con' in his name hints at self-delusion) tires of these excesses, which ushers in the first point of the Buddhist commentary: the self can never be satisfied, because it must continually renew itself, as must our desires. As soon as one want is fulfilled, another one springs up. At this stage, he turns to the other extreme and tries to destroy this 'self' which has now become a burden. Tragically for him, his repeated suicide attempts all fail because he must always start the next day, alive and in the same shape. For Buddhists, suicide carries a very heavy karmic weight because it represents a very strong craving (for non-existence).

In the end, exhausted by his attempts to satisfy his self and escape the cycle of rebirth, Connors changes tack. He turns his attentions away from the concerns of his self, and towards the world in which he is trapped: perhaps trying more constructive pursuits would allow his days to pass more pleasurably. He turns over a new leaf and starts doing good deeds, not to bolster his ego and 'buy' his way out of his ordeal with an accumulation of merit, but out of a genuine concern for his fellow human beings. He spends time learning how to play the piano, for example, in order that he may give pleasure to listeners, not impress them. Ultimately, he wakes up to a new day and the cycle is broken, but only because he has stopped trying so hard to satisfy himself or escape his existence. By busying himself with concerns beyond his ego, Connors manages to transcend this 'Verhaftung' and his lifecycle continues in a more conventional pattern: he is not fully enlightened, but he has shed many of his delusions and unskillful actions, and thus finally exhausted the effect of karma.

It is not too great a step to suggest that both Josef K. and K. inhabit 'Groundhog Days' of their own. Josef K. learns little in his repeated attempts to shake off the arrest, which is tantamount to a person trying to divorce himself from his life. His only hope would have been to take the early advice and look a little more closely at the unskillful intentions which have dogged his existence. K. fared better in the later novel, because after a similar merry-go-round of craving-driven actions he relinquishes his ego's quest for recognition from the Castle. After the Bürgel episode, where he is apparently offered a way into the Castle, K. falls asleep and misses this chance to satisfy a want. The result, however, is not despair or dismay, but equanimity and relative content. In the final scenes, K. interacts with Castle officials and villagers with a calm reserve, but rather than abdication or surrender, this is disengagement, a tactical withdrawal. Just like the weatherman's switch from

wrong view to right view, K. has realised that his struggle is not against the Castle, but against the all-consuming self, which burns everything with never-satisfied hunger. This dawning awareness is evidenced in K.'s victory dream after passing up Bürgel's offer: paradoxically, K. has achieved victory in defeat – he has gained by letting go. As Connors found after practising skillful actions, those who do not seek shall find.

If we investigate Kafka's treatment of human discontent, we can begin to assess how Kafka views the human condition: what is it like to exist as a person in this world? We can analyse the origins of the misfortunes that befall K. and his fictional cousins, and trace them back to three potential sources: two belong to the Western tradition, and one to a non-Western approach.

In the first case, the origins of suffering are largely reckoned to be external to the narrative hero, not of his making, attributable to a specific other source, albeit a distant, inaccessible one. The individual, such as K. in *Das Schloß*, comes under the power of an overarching authority, which is typically inscrutable, invisible, and arbitrary in its judgments. There is little that the individual can do in the face of such an omnipotent force, and the tale we read can be seen as the struggle to connect with and reconcile with the Creator. Here, from a Christian perspective for example, the suffering could be 'resolved' by putting faith in the Creator. In the case recounted in *Das Schloß*, K. misses this potential solution by failing to trust the external authority, and by insisting on explanations or guarantees. Faced with a perceived exclusion from the Castle's approval, he bangs his head stubbornly against this brick wall of divine revelation. The source of the suffering is the unrealisable or unconceivable gap between the individual and the whole. The suffering is exacerbated by K.'s doggedness; a lack of faith rules out hope of salvation.

In the second case, the origins of suffering are similarly external to the protagonist, but this time not attributable to any specific centre or creative

power. It is rather that the randomness and impersonal nature of the universe holds sway and this causes the troubles to occur. The protagonist, for example, Josef K. or Gregor Samsa, appears to have done little wrong, for there is no account of any specific transgression. The individual is unaware of any 'sin', but experiences suffering nevertheless. Here, the existentialist or deconstructionist position would point out that faith in the religious sense is pointless, as there is nobody or nothing out there to hear our cries. Instead, we have to realise that the flux holds sway and we will inevitably be subjected to some buffeting. In light of this, the best we can do is try to suspend belief in a creator, create our own meaning and sense of purpose, and build projects for our own lives, reassured in the knowledge that suffering is bad luck and not punishment for our sins. Win or lose, at least we have been 'true' to our selves.

The third case is different from the other two in that the origins of suffering are essentially put down to the individual himself. There is no almighty to blame and the fact of the universe's randomness cannot be offered up as an excuse either. Anything which arises has a cause and does not exist independently. This is the doctrine of dependent origination which underpins Buddhist thinking. The individual is the principal (not sole) architect of his own destiny, which is shaped by the decisions he makes, the actions he commits and the thoughts he thinks, as well as by the things he chooses not to do, think or say. For the most part, this latter view has not been linked to an interpretation of Kafka's works. It reflects the Buddhist position, which starts off by stating that nothing in the universe is a constant, but everything is subject to passing through an endless cycle of life, death and rebirth. These facts are not to be lamented or celebrated, merely accepted as a fundamental truth.

In the first two scenarios dealing with suffering, the individual tends to be seen as existing at odds with his surroundings, set apart, out of step. Reconciliation or salvation may or may not be possible, but there is at the very outset a tear in the fabric of existence, seen via the perspective of the individual. This is because the individual sees via the 'I', which is always striving to set itself off against the other, the not-self.¹¹⁷

In Buddhism, the individual is urged to realise the fact that there is no self or soul of any lasting or reliable significance, but an unbroken, ceaseless stream of events and phenomena in which we are propelled. With every effort to preserve, define or contain the self, to set it apart against the not-self, we are perpetuating suffering. This is how the individual is responsible for his suffering and is the only person who can find salvation. The path leading away from suffering starts from an enlightened mind, from the awareness that the ego needs to be dissolved, that not-self is the reality, and chasing after self is a delusory pursuit doomed to failure.

2.1.4 Awakening and enlightenment

*The Buddha is not a savior but a guide who teaches the technique of saving oneself after having tested it himself. The destiny of man is not controlled by the whims of a creator, but by the kind of life he leads, his thoughts, speech and actions in accordance with the law of cause and effect.*¹¹⁸

The themes of awakening and enlightenment cannot be overstated in Buddhism, as they refer to a nascent understanding of the Dharma, i.e. the truth about the way things are. This can arise through one's own efforts and enquiries, be prompted by an external agent, such as a teacher, or be triggered by an incident; it can arrive at the end of long contemplation, or it can come in a blinding flash. It is both the entry-point into Buddhism and its goal,

¹¹⁷ Attachment to self, therefore, brings vulnerability: 'Our greatest fear...is the fear of losing our sense of self'. Dzigar Kongtrül, *It's Up to You* (Boston: Shambhala, 2005), p. 62.

¹¹⁸ Yogavacara, p. 15.

however, and its lack cannot be substituted by blind faith or expectation of grace. Without awakening, we remain in a state of ignorance and no amount of effort or application will alleviate our suffering.¹¹⁹ Lack of enlightenment is a key feature in Kafka's work, suggesting how serious the implications are when ignorance is perpetuated. In *Der Proceß*, Josef K. 'wakes up' to his arrest, but does not awaken from his misguided lifestyle; in *Das Schloß*, K. falls asleep during his interview with Bürgel, but awakens as a new man.

This initial glimpse of the Dharma is an opening through which the individual can begin to improve his life. Awakening is not merely the endpoint or goal, but a doorway through to a clearer perspective. The aim of Buddhism after the awakening is to nurture this new insight across a whole lifetime of vigilance, to extend the awakened moment until it becomes an ever-present consciousness or enlightened state.¹²⁰ In other words, the struggle against ignorance is an ongoing process: one must strive to be always mindful.

Buddhism is named after the Buddha, but it is his teaching (the Dharma) not his person that is important. His death did not save lives, and he was not sent by God: he was just able to access the truth. This is of fundamental importance, because it sets Buddhism apart from Judaeo-Christian thought at the outset – there is no cult of personality, of self.¹²¹ As the 'Awakened One', the Buddha is a guide, not a saviour. Accordingly, Buddhism stresses the need to develop one's own powers of understanding and not rely on 'fremde Hilfe' like Josef K. Some people can wake up at the slightest disturbance, some

119 Bhikkhu Vimalo (Walter Kulbarz) describes the essence of the Buddha's doctrine as awakening and enlightenment in *Awakening to the Truth* (Thailand: Annual Publication Buddhist Association, 1974).

120 A good introduction to the aim of Buddhism is provided in Buddhadasa Bhikku's *Handbook for Mankind*, (Surat Thani: Dhammadana Foundation, 1996).

121 Sangharakshita goes so far as to eschew the name 'Buddhism' in favour of 'Dhamma-Vinaya', translated as 'principles and practice', in *The Taste of Freedom* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1997), p. 9.

need repeated jolts, and others need violent shaking – the same can be said for awakening to the Dharma.

Nirvana, like karma, is a Buddhist concept that is often misunderstood. It is not a place to go to or a prize to claim, but represents total attunement to emptiness: this 'dimension' is here now but obscured by our attachments. The aim of Buddhist teaching is to show people how to 'exit' lives of suffering locked into a cycle of rebirths, or samsara. The first step towards nirvana must be made through awareness, through shaking off the fetters of craving, attachment and delusion. By clinging to an idea of the self, perpetual wandering along the blind alleys of samsara is guaranteed. All the subsequent steps are taken in a bid to maintain a state of mindfulness in which enlightenment reigns. It is unhelpful to use terms such as 'access' and 'entry' when speaking of nirvana, for this suggests that it is a place. It is rather what happens to the individual when the veils of selfhood are lifted and reality can be experienced in its purest form, beyond all duality and separation.

Few of Kafka's characters get close to experiencing this dimension of pure being, because they are all hung up on their self-identity. While striving to preserve, define, defend or impose their self, they will automatically find the doors to this other realm locked. It is only when they let go of their hungers, attachments, obsessions and desires that a kind of peaceful equanimity will reign and the dawning insight will illuminate the way. Josef K. was too attached to his self – this is the warning given to him on his arrest. He failed to take note and pursued his path of trying to establish a clean slate for his self-image: his downfall was inevitable. In contrast, K. renounced his Castle quest and consequently experienced a form of peace and refined insight. There can be no talk of nirvana for K., but in beginning the process of letting go of his attachment to self, he has progressed further along the path on which Josef K. stumbled.

The cornerstones of Western traditions, such as self, justice and freedom, are considered desirable and realisable. Buddhism on the other hand stresses emptiness because the nature of existence is transitory, ungraspable and ultimately inessential. The line taken on these issues impacts on the question of what life 'means', or what its purpose might be. If one approaches *Der Proceß* from a Christian point of view, Josef K.'s demise would seem terrifying. He is arrested without apparent charge and suffers a painful death at the hands of Court executioners. Eternal damnation appears to await him. The doubts surrounding the nature of Josef K.'s 'sin' assume great significance, because the rest of eternity hangs on it. What precisely did he do wrong? Is this Original Sin? If so, why should Josef K. pay for an inherited crime? Given an omniscient creator, such a case is mystifying and tragic, reconcilable only through absolute faith in God's mysterious ways. From a Buddhist viewpoint, the 'crime' could be ignorant attachment to self, and hence Josef K. suffers an appropriate karmic punishment. The 'sentence' is not for eternity, but for the next life (or lives), with new, fresh karma being accumulated to keep the process going, until enlightenment finds a way to stop the cycle from turning. The Buddhist reading would then appear less pessimistic.

The Judaeo-Christian mindset is founded on the 'Word' – the law or organising principle established by a supreme authority. It assumes a purpose for the universe, complete with a plan, in which we all figure. This reach for meaning may outstrip the human spiritual and intellectual grasp, but it is reasoned that theoretically an answer is 'there', and so efforts to find the answer are sanctioned as positive or life-affirming. In the world of science, it is held that human beings should strive towards an understanding of this supreme 'Truth', and that the tools of reason and logic will eventually succeed in unlocking the door to a comprehension of what life is all about. In the world of religion, it is considered acceptable to use faith to bridge the gap between

what we can know and what we cannot know – trust in the ultimate benevolence of the Creator. In either case, knowable or not, the assumption is that an absolute meaning exists. In contrast, Buddhism tends to keep silent on metaphysical matters and prefers to turn its attention inwards in an attempt to understand what goes on in our own bodies and minds; indeed, it is insight into the truths and fears underlying our individual existence which holds the key to understanding the universe as a whole.

Buddhism thus sidesteps the question of life's purpose, a response which would most likely be met with dismay from Judaeo-Christian quarters. To a Zen student, the question 'Why are we here?' is misguided and ranks alongside koans such as 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?', a non-sequitur guaranteed to meet with bafflement. The question might be answered with reference to the here-and-now because, according to Buddhist philosophy, we only have access to the flux of the present moment. Nirvana has no place, but it does have a time and that is the present. The Western 'carpe diem' is a self-oriented philosophy which urges us to live now and accumulate as many 'present victories' as possible. But this can become an attachment to opportunity, a pitfall K. eventually learns to avoid when he stops 'displacing' his self into the future where satisfaction awaits. His rejection of displacement should not be seen as defeatist, but a positive endorsement of non-attachment.

Buddhism focuses on 'the moment', but its 'meaning' is devoid of personal qualities and attachments, and this is the fundamental difference. Meditation is a key practice in the search for enlightenment, not because it delves deep into the mind to unlock rational understanding and insight, but because it switches off the mind's activity, stalls its thinking, freezes thought to allow the flux of the moment to flow without being constrained by personal ties.

This goes some way to explaining K.'s 'victory' in *Das Schloß*. In Western terms it is a hollow victory because he has won nothing except perhaps his dignity in not bowing to the Castle. In Buddhist eyes, K. is free to live his life differently – his failure to conquer the Castle is a failure to 'take the bait' of attachment, as he swims past Bürgel's dangling hook.

2.2 The text as a tripwire

*The attainment of enlightenment from ego's point of view is extreme death, the death of self, the death of me and mine, the death of the watcher. It is the ultimate and final disappointment. Treading the spiritual path is painful. It is constant unmasking, peeling off of layer after layer of masks. It involves insult after insult.*¹²²

In the above quotation, Trungpa's stark warning about the hardships to be endured on the path to enlightenment is intended as preparatory guidance for the individual about to embark on a spiritual journey. The words contain an uncomfortable but candid message, delivered in an illocutionary style, and the insults referred to describe the assault on the self that accompanies the path to insight.

Zen masters tend to be direct with their insults, as shown by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's reply when pressed by a follower for guidance on the subject of enlightenment: 'What do you want to know for? You may not like it.'¹²³ This classic Zen response illustrates the perlocutionary technique employed in many koans and bears more than a passing resemblance to Kafka's short piece, *Gibs Auf*, discussed below. In barely a dozen words, Suzuki deflects a simple request for information about an important Buddhist concept with a precision attack on two pillars of Western philosophy: 'know' and 'like'. First, the issue surrounding 'wanting to know' is telling because the presence of

122 Chögyam Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom*, p. 6.

123 Quotation at [www.quangduc.com/English/basic/14dharma.html#What is enlightenment](http://www.quangduc.com/English/basic/14dharma.html#What%20is%20enlightenment).

‘want’ flags up the point that enlightenment cannot be achieved through selfhood, the seat of desire. Second, the value of ‘knowing’ is questioned: as an intellectual exercise, it has limitations in being able to effect understanding of emptiness. In similar vein to Suzuki, Seung Sahn deployed the refrain ‘don’t know’ on a regular basis, to communicate to his students that he did not have all the answers, that it was not necessary to have all the answers, and that it was often beneficial not to have any answers. Third, Suzuki’s masterstroke is to associate the pursuit of enlightenment with the pursuit of pleasure. As Trungpa suggests above, understanding emptiness will be a hard slog and result in the death of self. Those people who seek nirvana because it is viewed as a heavenly paradise are completely misguided, so Suzuki confronts this ‘desire’ directly.

2.2.1 Koan effect

*‘You talked about the first principle again, but I still don’t know what it is,’ I said to Suzuki. ‘I don’t know,’ he said, ‘is the first principle.’*¹²⁴

The koan’s chief weapon is its unsettling effect, and it can be deployed in different types of texts from single-line aphorisms to full-length novels.

Accordingly, it is not just Kafka’s aphorisms themselves which bear the hallmarks of Zen techniques, but other elements in Kafka’s work achieve a similar effect, from short pieces such as *Gibs Auf*, to longer narratives such as *Ein Hungerkünstler*.

Through the koan’s nonsensical and paradoxical features, its perlocutionary effects could ‘migrate’ to other genres. If it were in fact possible to have such a thing as a 200-page koan, it might read like *Der Proceß*.¹²⁵ The work would become an extended paradox designed to ‘arrest’ readers, to jolt

124 Quotation at www.tumblr.com/tagged/shunryu%20suzuki?before=39.

125 In *Reading Emptiness* Humphries floats the idea of ‘a vast koan’ when he considers the impact of Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

them out of their misperceptions of the world, their role in it and relationship to it. Furthermore, where Kafka's work resists conventional philological definition and interpretation, it does not have to be a sign of how painful the human condition is, but can be taken as corroborative evidence of koan-like qualities, aimed at dissolving attachment to self.

Just as the 'cumulative' packets of information built up through illocutionary readings can eventually lead to understanding, so can the cumulative effects of exposure to paradoxical koans lead to enlightenment. No Zen master would insist that hearing a single koan would bring a flash of understanding of the Dharma (though it is not impossible): reading koans for enlightenment is not like trying different keys in a lock and hoping for access. In fact, it could be said that none of the keys/koans will ever 'fit' the lock and the point of the practice is to realise this. It is the repeated 'hits' and failed access which break down dependence on orthodox thinking and open up the path to not-self and emptiness.

In terms of reading literature, if the illocutionary approach arranges jigsaw pieces to form a picture, the perlocutionary approach makes sure there are pieces missing, duplicated or misshapen. For an intellectual understanding, all the pieces fit together in some way and each piece relates to others around it; to block this route, Zen alters the pieces so that they appear superficially to fit, but on closer inspection fail to build up to a coherent whole. Thus the Zen koan acts as a perlocutionary aphorism, deliberately refusing to deliver an intelligible message.

According to Iser, the reader engages with a text through its gaps, and in this respect Kafka's work offers the reader plenty of points of entry, though the gaps tend to frustrate, rather than stimulate. In Iser's analysis of the reading process, the conventional aphorism would be classified as a didactic text, because there is little work for the reader to do, no gap in which to formulate

his interpretation – all the jigsaw pieces are supplied by the author, and no contribution is needed from the reader. In contrast, much of Kafka's aphoristic writing carries a non-standard quality that bears comparison with Zen's perlocutionary koans. This explains why reading Kafka can sometimes be an uncomfortable experience, with paradoxical statements and unexpected twists in the narrative, often producing cyclical (some might say repetitive) rather than linear paths. From a Zen perspective, such writing would be deemed successful, as it would have delivered its perlocutionary moment in the reader's confusion. If it transpires that a reader 'enjoys' the uneasy ride through the tales of suffering or the all-pervading sense of gloom in a text, the medium has failed to deliver a 'glimpse of emptiness', or rather has 'only' succeeded in imparting an intellectual 'truth' on an illocutionary level (e.g. we are doomed to suffer).

Reading Kafka's work as a Buddhist would demand the same approach as 'doing anything' as a Buddhist: with awareness or mindfulness. The gaps, paradoxes and contradictions which litter Kafka's work function as obstacles to arriving at meaning, and hence reveal 'emptiness'. Here, the practice of meditation can be informative for it offers a method of mental distillation which strips away the myriad concerns of the mind and focuses on the reality of 'the present moment'. When the mind 'thinks', its engagement encompasses a swirl of people, places, moods and countless other elements that race around in an overwhelming matrix of impulses which feed back values to the self, the 'me'. In meditation, the object is to become aware of the swirl without getting entangled in it, to filter out references to the past and links to the future, leaving a purified moment.

To 'read' as a Buddhist the principles of not-self and mindfulness are important. This explains the efficacy of koans for Zen purposes because these paradoxical statements encompass the irreverence, suffering and challenge

that enquirers must face. Typically brief and aphoristic, koans do not hold a series of 'views' to be learned, but are delivered for the performance. If the reader is the batsman, the koan is a type of ball that is difficult to 'read' or deal with, like a 'googly' causes confusion by veering off in an unexpected direction.

Felix Greß notes this constructive use of paradox in Kafka. Rather than deploy paradox as 'das sprachliche Zugeständnis der Hilflosigkeit gegenüber den Forderungen der Transzendenz', Kafka finds it possible 'vom Inkommensurablen zu reden'.¹²⁶ For Greß, Kafka uses this technique of oblique references to help grasp the normally inaccessible: 'er dient den Lesern als Signal und Hinweis, das Dargestellte nicht wörtlich zu nehmen.'¹²⁷ This is akin to the perlocutionary effect of a Zen koan, as it tries to 'refract' understanding past conventional thinking into a different dimension.

The individual who is unable to 'read' the koan has no room to manoeuvre into a position of safety or comfort, for the only options available are all similarly disquieting, illogical and threatening. This already sounds Kafkaesque, but the suffering induced in the listener/reader is not intended to represent the *meaning* of life, but its *reality*.¹²⁸ There are two elements to the koan, its text and its effect, with the text typically non-sense and the effect usually confusion, and it could be said that the art of the koan lies in the latter. The Western reader, for example, might wonder what the text signifies, searching within his self if necessary for clues to help unlock any potential meaning. Sooner or later, the Zen reader learns to discount the text as inherently meaningless and notes that the resultant unease is not a representation of anything but the essence of the impermanent nature of being

126 Felix Greß, *Die gefährdete Freiheit* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), p. 24.

127 Ibid., p. 24.

128 The prison chaplain says as much about 'the Law' to Josef K. in *Der Proceß*: 'Man muß nicht alles für wahr halten, man muß es nur für notwendig halten' (p. 303).

and meaning.¹²⁹ This non-sense should not then be turned into ‘some thing’, but simply understood as the reality behind all things: emptiness. As long as this truth is kept in mind, the self will not suffer because all attachments, cravings, desires and fears will dissolve in the face of this universal characteristic.

2.2.2 Kafka’s koans

*It is foolish to try to interpret Kafka. The text is there to read, not to be interpreted. [...] What it refers to does not exist. A work affirms only its inessential essence, a nothing or a silence.*¹³⁰

The short piece known as *Gibs Auf* (1922) is open to a variety of illocutionary interpretations which would attempt to decipher its meaning by evaluating its semantic content.¹³¹ A Buddhist reader, for example, would highlight ‘Weg’, ‘Schutzmann’ and ‘gibs auf’ as key words and use them to determine the sense of the text. In this case, the narrator is seeking the way, but feeling lost and flustered in an unfamiliar location. The policeman should be there to offer protection as his name suggests, but he surprisingly declines to help, and furthermore advises the narrator to give up. There is no indication that the policeman does not know the way, but his response instead pinpoints the narrator’s dependency: ‘*Von mir* willst du den Weg erfahren?’ (my italics). The Buddha insisted on the importance of self-reliance and discovering the path for ourselves: you cannot borrow somebody else’s eyes to help you see, as Josef K. was warned about chasing ‘fremde Hilfe’. Here, the policeman assumes Buddha status in his refusal to ‘spoon-feed’ the lost soul. This

129 Chung-Ying Cheng offers the following view: ‘The semantic incongruity [...] in a Zen paradox leads the mind of the hearer to a state where he realizes that he could not and should not attach any reference to the given semantic structure.’ Thus, the hearer should look into ‘an uncategorizable ontological structure of no specific reference which has been referred to as the ultimate reality of self-nature or mind’ (pp. 91-92).

130 Van Meter Ames, ‘Art for Art’s Sake Again?’ in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol 3, No. 3 (Spring, 1975), p. 305.

131 Published as ‘Ein Kommentar’ in *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente* (Vol. 2), ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1992), p. 530.

approach sees the way to enlightenment as a tightrope; so narrow is the way, that it only supports a single traveller.

From a perlocutionary angle, a Buddhist reading would come to a similar conclusion about the arduous path to insight, but via a different route. Rather than inviting the reader to edge along the tightrope of meaning, the text trips him up with its message simply 'to give up'. The text (koan) is constructed in such a way that the final words of the policeman are expressed independently of any other utterance, and thus it is ambiguous whether the narrator should give up his search for the station or abandon the quest (for the way) altogether. The unsatisfactoriness of the reply stems from associating 'gibs auf' with directions, spiritual guidance or any other specific object. The command 'gibs auf' takes on a negative charge and invites a pessimistic reading. However, it should be noted that the policeman is smiling as he responds, so his apparent lack of helpfulness could actually be a calculated attempt to divert the narrator from a misguided course: in true Zen style, this guide urges the lost traveller to shun the straight and narrow and offers the more expansive advice: give up the quest (attachment). In similar fashion, Artur and Jeremias are sent to 'distract' K., who takes his Castle crusade too seriously.

Roy Pascal's understanding of *Gibs Auf* displays distinctly Zen features as he explains how we are left 'baffled' when 'the normal assumption of order, upon which we build our daily existence, is suddenly shattered'.¹³² He goes on to describe 'a general experience of incipient lostness and isolation', but his bewilderment informs a negative illocutionary message, in 'the repeated existence of being abandoned'.¹³³ With a koan, however, bewilderment is the intended 'reaction' and does not form the basis of any 'meaning'. This

132 Roy Pascal, *Kafka's Narrators: A Study of his Stories and Sketches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 160-61.

133 Ibid., p. 161.

perlocutionary effect is produced by the link between the phrase ‘gibs auf’ (surrender, admit defeat) and its issue from the mouth of a trusted figure of authority. The incongruity can be defused by breaking the link, either treating ‘gibs auf’ as a ‘standalone’ utterance (let go, of attachments generally), or becoming independent of the authority figure. The same can be seen in other areas of Kafka’s work, where an apparent paradox with its negative connotations often disguises a more palatable reading, such as K.’s ‘conversion’ at the end of *Das Schloß*. K.’s victory dream seems at odds with his dashed hopes of entry into the Castle, but the final scenes exude an equanimity and peace that suggest his letting go was in fact a triumph.

Gibs Auf serves as a good example of perlocutionary effect with its apparent exhortation to surrender. In the face of the unknown and the unknowable, the text invites a negative interpretation, but a Buddhist reader would detect a subtle caution against craving direction (meaning), and this awareness wards off the dangers of attachment.¹³⁴ As a kind of Zen roadblock, the koan is not there to stop us from reaching our goals, but to make us question the point of our goals. The tripwire in Kafka’s *Gibs Auf* works in a similar way: ‘Quite possibly there is no such thing as spiritual practice except stepping out of self-deception, stopping our struggle to get hold of spiritual states. *Just give that up*’ (my italics).¹³⁵

2.3 Scope

*The spiritual journey, then, is a journey of detachment, a process of learning how to let go. All of our problems, miseries, and unhappiness are caused by fixation - latching onto things and not being able to release them.*¹³⁶

134 Christian Goodden makes this point in another context: ‘The quest and all it stands for must be renounced’, from ‘The Great Wall of China: The Elaboration of an Intellectual Dilemma’, in Franz Kuna, ed., *On Kafka: Semi-Centenary Perspectives* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), p. 142.

135 Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom*, p. 150.

136 Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/letting-go.

If we separate Kafka's writing into three phases, the scope of this dissertation will concentrate on the middle phase from *Der Proceß*, through his *Zürau* aphorisms, to a selection of his later works. This thesis contends that the aphorisms occupy a pivotal position in Kafka's literary output, not because they define his personal philosophy, but rather because they signpost a development in his sensibilities, moving from expressions displaying mixed elements of Western and Buddhist-type thought in his earlier works, to a style and delivery close to certain Buddhist practices in his later writing. The aphorisms show a shift in themes from initial reservations about how the individual can live in a dualistic world to a heightened appreciation of the demands and dangers of attaching to self. This transition in Kafka's work and its growing affinity with Buddhist ideas can be charted as it moves broadly across early, middle and late periods, measured by its coincidence with the stages of The Four Noble Truths.

Kafka's early writing includes *Das Urteil*, *Die Verwandlung* and *In der Strafkolonie*, and the themes covered run from judgment, punishment and guilt, to paternal authority and family constraints. As Ritchie Robertson suggests, there is a wide range of concerns, from specific social issues such as 'the nature of life in the contemporary urban and industrialized world', to 'psychological and moral problems', which touched on his own experience.¹³⁷ The mood is dark and uncompromising, with a clear representation of The First Noble Truth of suffering. While *Das Urteil* is considered Kafka's literary breakthrough, the early texts show few signs of progressing beyond the stage of identification with suffering and developing the 'skillful' outlook linked to non-attachment.

137 Ritchie Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism, Politics and Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 85.

Der Proceß marks the next phase in Kafka's work, where the mood remains sombre, but the earlier issues surrounding judgment and guilt have taken on a broader sweep, beyond the personal. Josef K. wrestles with authority, but his troubles cannot be traced back to a paternal or social source; he resists punishment, but his claim of innocence is not justified. In terms of guilt, the arrest without charge suggests that life itself is on trial, rather than a specific act within it. There are flashes of insight and narrative irony which suggest that Josef K. is on the wrong track and needs to stop blaming external influences for his suffering. This shift in emphasis to an analysis of cause marks progression towards The Second Noble Truth, which focuses on craving as the root of suffering.

Accordingly, the textual analysis will start with *Der Proceß*, which can be seen as a spiritual breakthrough, as it has moved beyond the representation of suffering to an analysis of its cause, a feature which becomes more prominent in his subsequent work. After *Der Proceß*, Kafka wrote a series of aphorisms which touch on issues across the spectrum from suffering to the path away from it. It is significant that Jeff Humphries in his study of how to read as a Buddhist proposed Kafka's aphoristic paradoxes as the style most suited to communicating the experience of emptiness: 'The closest that Western thought, or deconstruction, ever comes to reaching beyond its limitations has been in this kind of style: some of the work of Franz Kafka, for instance.'¹³⁸

In the final phase, which includes composition of *Das Schloß*, there is a more distinct movement away from the personal, individual quest for self-definition, and progress towards release or enlightenment through detachment from delusion. In other words, there are chinks of light, as exemplified by K.'s rejection of the quest after the episode with Bürgel, and this suggests

¹³⁸ Humphries, p. 28.

development towards The Third Noble Truth of cessation. The theme of judgment recedes further into the background and the foreground is occupied with issues concerning the nature of existence itself, the relationship between the individual and his self, rather than his location in the wider community. Robertson describes Kafka's late fiction as 'for the most part quiet and restrained' and also notes an increased propensity towards 'reflection'.¹³⁹ I will later draw attention to K.'s growing powers of reflection in *Das Schloß*, as his struggle with the Castle authorities oscillates between periods of action and contemplation, and in *Ein Hungerkünstler*, where two narrators ponder the challenges they face with sober, stoic commentaries.

The next four chapters will read selections of Kafka's work using the two Buddhist methods outlined above: an illocutionary approach to gauge the impact of spiritual guidance – this path constitutes the tightrope; and a perlocutionary approach to test whether the textual incongruities and paradoxes can be linked to the Zen practice of deliberate confusion, to wean the reader off attachment to meaningfulness – this constitutes the tripwire.

Given the limitations of space and the different concerns of Kafka's earlier fiction, the texts chosen for study are *Der Proceß* and *Das Schloß* to represent the novels, the collection *Ein Hungerkünstler* for examples of shorter pieces, and the Zürau aphorisms for a non-narrative style. I aim to show in greater detail how suffering in Kafka's work presents a focused running commentary on how we are slaves to our selves, captives of our cravings. Kafka wrote page after page of commentary on how human beings continue to search blindly for a truth which is already at hand, should they just take a moment to open their eyes and behold it. Kafka was not a philosopher, but he did not need to be in order to create texts which speak in a Buddhist

¹³⁹ Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism*, p. 273.

'language': he investigated individual fixations on selfhood, caused by the deluded dependence on the ever-hungry ego. However, the major effect of Kafka's art is the way it translates suffering into the reading experience, and for this reason his fiction, especially from *Der Proceß* onwards, reveals a Buddhist sensibility which supports McCort's description of him as a Zen master.

Chapter 3 *Der Proceß*

3.1 Introduction

*Zen master: Do not search for truth. Just stop having opinions.*¹⁴⁰

In the previous chapter, two approaches to reading Kafka were suggested to show how different interpretations can be formed of his work. The illocutionary method (information/illustration) indicates an analytical, rational approach, which tries to explain the ideas being presented; the perlocutionary method (performance/demonstration), on the other hand, represents an intuitive approach which tries to induce a spiritual understanding beyond thinking. From a Buddhist perspective, *Der Proceß* marks an important milestone in Kafka's writing because it showcases a prevalence of perlocutionary effects which help develop insight into such universal laws as not-self and impermanence, by immersing the individual (the character within the text as well as the reader without) in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable environment where those laws prevail.

From its opening lines, *Der Proceß* raises issues which go to the heart of all philosophical systems – is there such a thing as justice per se and how is it administered? By launching the novel with an arrest without a charge, a quest is set in motion to establish innocence or guilt. Josef K. (and the reader) proceeds to gather intelligence via a variety of sources: Court officials and employees, clients, acquaintances, as well as pronouncements, parables and anecdotes. None of this information seems to explain what Josef K. has been arrested for, why he in particular has been targeted, and how he can extricate himself from this predicament.

140 Timothy Freke in Christopher Titmuss, ed., *Sons and Daughters of the Buddha: Daily Meditations from the Buddhist Tradition* (London: Rider, 2002), p. 20.

An illocutionary analysis of *Der Proceß* would examine the content of the information presented directly in the text, the messages communicated by the various characters and the narrator. This information is open to (mis)interpretation because words and phrases have different shades of meaning and can be read in different ways, but the 'source' of the information at least is distinct. There cannot therefore be a single 'correct' evaluation of illocutionary messages, but many versions, depending on how the information is collected and managed.¹⁴¹

Little in the world of the Court points to answers that would satisfy concerns regarding the security of the self, and from this aspect it is understandable to see Josef K.'s death as an unfair and excessive punishment. For Heinz Politzer, the novel presents a gloomy outlook because it is 'an indictment of a world order where authorities lie', and the impenetrability of the Court and the mystery of K.'s guilt are major flaws which leave Josef K. at the mercy of a 'dubious justice'.¹⁴² The only route to salvation left open is that of trust. God can never be 'known' by an intellect as limited as a human's, so a leap of faith may help negotiate instances of extreme and meaningless suffering.¹⁴³

Christian Eschweiler, however, takes the opposite view and believes his reworked edition of the novel uncovers significant sources of hope. Two major revisions are to place the cathedral chapter with its illuminating parable 'Vor dem Gesetz' as a fulcrum in a central position, and to include the 'embraced death' of 'Ein Traum' as a counterweight to the 'imposed execution' of 'Ende'.

141 For Sokel, 'the trial is a summons to interpretation which cannot consist in passively seeing what is there, but rather in an urge to search for meaning which the seeker must provide for himself'. Walter H. Sokel, 'Dual Perspective in *The Trial*' in William J. Dodd, ed., *Kafka: The Metamorphosis, The Trial and The Castle* (New York: Longman, 1995), p. 111.

142 Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), p. 163.

143 John Kelly sees guilt and salvation in the novel, in 'The Trial and the Theology of Crisis', in Angel Flores, ed., *The Kafka Problem* (New York: Gordian Press, 1975), pp. 151-71.

Although mankind is torn between two opposing worlds, 'der sterblichen der Natur und der unsterblichen des Geistes',¹⁴⁴ redemption can be found through 'die geistige Auszeichnung des Menschen'.¹⁴⁵ By finding a way to embrace death, man can have the last word: 'Deshalb ist der Mensch im Weltbild Kafkas dazu bestimmt, leben zu müssen and sterben zu wollen, um überleben zu können'.¹⁴⁶

From a Buddhist perspective, there is also hope in the text, but it can be found in all editions because Josef K.'s self-centred ignorance stands out as a warning of 'unskillful' behaviour. As K.'s trial unfolds, a number of key Buddhist concepts emerge, such as The Three Universal Characteristics, The Four Noble Truths and Dependent Origination. The Law of the Court is not so much a collection of discrete rules and regulations relating to specific misdemeanours, but a philosophy which governs everyday lives and in this respect it bears comparison with the natural laws of the Dharma.

Josef K. misunderstands his 'Verhaftung' and wonders how he can be arrested and go about his normal life, because he misconstrues the law in accordance with which he is being judged. K. ignores all the cues about paying more attention to himself and assumes he is dealing with a criminal charge. Unable to understand what this very peculiar 'Proceß' says about him, K. determines that there must be something wrong with the authority from which the arrest order issues. K. is sent messages from sources that offer a different view, but he is too narrow-minded and self-preoccupied to take heed. First, the warders pick up on the contradiction between K.'s reflex protests of innocence and his admission that he does not know anything about this 'Gesetz'. Second, even Frau Grubach can see that the arrest may do K. some

144 Eschweiler, *Kosmos*, p. 13.

145 Ibid., p. 15.

146 Ibid., p. 13.

good: 'Es handelt sich ja um Ihr Glück' (DP 33), an assessment lost on K., who dismisses the event as insignificant.¹⁴⁷

If the law of the trial is taken to be a kind of natural law, it makes sense that K. can carry on with his life 'ungestört'. In fact, his life is not undisturbed at all, but has been turned upside-down by the arrest. The absence of physical incarceration gives the impression that nothing has happened, but in truth nothing is the same now. His guilt issues from not seeing the Dharma, and his suffering grows with every moment of ignorance.

The perlocutionary force of the novel is strong for many passages have a koan-like quality, in that they pose questions which are unanswerable or provide answers which are questionable. These instances range from the particular (e.g. Huld's bewildering explanations of legal action) to the general (the nature of the Law). A Buddhist reader can assume that the confusion is set as a deliberate challenge to conventional ways of thinking. The subsequent feelings of disorientation and frustration should lead to an abandonment of attachment to self and realisation of the Dharma. This awakening is not an invitation to destroy cherished notions such as self, justice and good, but brings insight into the essential emptiness of all phenomena. The work as a whole resembles a Zen koan as it pushes readers to the point where logic and other traditional mainstays no longer offer reliable solutions and relax their hold.

From a Buddhist perspective, both methods of approach support a skillful interpretation of the novel: they show that the prospect of an impersonal, universal Law governing existence is nothing to fear if our ties with selfhood are cut. The text makes 'thinking' difficult, blocking attempts at

147 Franz Kafka, *Der Proceß*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1990). Hereafter, references will be taken from this edition and marked as DP, followed by the page number.

constructing a reliable framework of principles, because attachment to fixed ideas results in enslavement to illusions.

As the story unfolds, K. walks a series of ‘tightropes and tripwires’ where certain messages are communicated to him, although in each case it appears that he fails to respond or show understanding. When reason and logic cannot communicate the Dharma, the perlocutionary countermeasure is to abandon rational argument. As a kind of spiritual medicine, the Zen koan is a bitter pill that provides a dose of illogicality, to help abandon attachment to cherished principles. A Buddhist reading of this text would see the action unfold in the following stages:

- Arrest: what it means and how Josef K. should deal with it
- Law: the philosophy underpinning the Court and its nature
- Consequences: cause and effect in the law and its demonstration to K.
- Guidance: advice about how Josef K. could approach his trial
- Closure: the reasons for Josef K.’s suffering and the trial’s conclusion.

3.2 Tightropes (illocutionary approach)

As the Buddhist view has consistently demonstrated, it is the perspective of the sufferer that determines whether a given experience perpetuates suffering or is a vehicle for awakening.¹⁴⁸

The illocutionary tightropes serve to show how Josef K. lacks awareness of his condition. He is presented with numerous opportunities to reflect upon his life and take steps to improve it, but instead he becomes defensive and arrogant, refusing to accept that he could be at fault. A Buddhist reading scrutinises the given environment for evidence of impermanence, suffering and not-self, and determines how far attachment and ignorance have taken root. As K. proceeds along the tightrope seeking an explanation of his arrest and vindication of his

148 Mark Epstein in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/changing-ones-view.

innocence, he reacts to passing signs as indications of truth or falsehood, friend or foe, gain or loss, and struggles when no clear answer is forthcoming. This dualistic appraisal of his situation contrasts with a Buddhist assessment, which reads the signs as fragments of the truth, and empty of reliable meaning. Josef K.'s pride and obstinacy are important factors in determining how he handles unwelcome situations (by finding blame elsewhere) or behaves towards other people (whether they might be useful in his case). He dismisses, misreads or simply misses the advice and experiences that come his way, and fails to negotiate a path out of ignorance to a more insightful perspective.

3.2.1 Arrest

*Our difficulties are not obstacles to the path; they are the path itself. They are opportunities to awaken. Can we learn what it means to welcome an unwanted situation, with its sense of groundlessness, as a wake-up call?*¹⁴⁹

The theme of awakening and its associated dawning of insight is central to Buddhism and holds a special significance for Kafka, for whom 'the ritual of life [...] begins with the sudden awakening, with a complete realization that everything is different from what it was in the previous instant'.¹⁵⁰ This view is reflected in the very beginning of *Der Proceß*, when K. is captured from his life of ignorance: waking in the morning is a pivotal moment identified with 'coming to consciousness'.¹⁵¹ For a Buddhist, failing to awaken means that we remain in a state of ignorance, condemned to lead a life plagued by suffering, caused by our attachment to impermanent things.

K. has ample opportunities to learn, observe and reflect, though he lets the chances pass by. The first tightrope, and perhaps the most significant and illuminating, is the arrest. There are essentially three scenes, each of which

149 Ezra Bayda in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/follow-difficult-path.

150 George H. Szanto, *Narrative Consciousness: Structure and Perception in the Fiction of Kafka, Beckett, and Robbe-Grillet* (Austin: University of Texas, 1972), p. 20.

151 Ibid., p. 20.

sheds light on the admittedly unusual situation: the unannounced home visit, the interview with the supervisor ('Aufseher'), and the brief conversation with Frau Grubach.

The first people K. interacts with on his 'awakening' are two 'Wächter' and their supervisor. They have been sent precisely to wake K. up from his sleepwalking through life, from his ignorance of the nature of reality, and to keep an eye on how he deals with his trial. When later recounting the scene to Fräulein Bürstner, K. confirms the role of the supervisor: 'Der Aufseher ruft als ob er mich wecken müßte' (DP 45).

No information is supplied – to the reader or to K. – as to the precise details of the arrest: why it has happened, who the arresting authorities are and what it concerns. We are not told for it is not important. What is important is the announcement and Josef K.'s reaction to this unexpected event. Despite an initial 'Warum denn?' the main question for K. appears to be who is bringing the charge, and not the nature of the charge itself. K. considers the matter of his guilt a side-issue: 'die Hauptfrage ist: von wem bin ich angeklagt?' (DP 21). This is at odds with the Buddha's advice to avoid unnecessary speculation.¹⁵² The warders and the supervisor, however, deflect K.'s preoccupation with authority and seek to lead him back to the main purpose of the arrest, which is to wake him up.

The precise nature of the 'Verhaftung' needs some examination as there is plenty of talk of arrest in the novel, but little of any specific charge relating to it. The first mention of 'verhaftet' comes in the opening sentence and appears as the consequence of an alleged 'Verleumdung'. This is the only time

¹⁵² The Buddha preferred to keep silent rather than speculate over metaphysical questions, urging his disciples towards practical efforts: 'Suppose a man is struck by a poisoned arrow and the doctor wishes to take out the arrow immediately. Suppose the man does not want the arrow removed until he knows who shot it, his age, his parents, and why he shot it. What would happen? If he were to wait until all these questions have been answered, the man might die first.' Thich Nhat Hanh at www.thebuddhistblog.blogspot.co.uk/2006/08/teaching-of-poisoned-arrow.html.

anything specific is offered to shed light on the arrest, and it appears as conjecture, perhaps reporting the view of Josef K., who remains convinced of his blamelessness. In protesting his innocence, however, Josef K. inadvertently walks into an 'ego' trap that aggravates his suffering. K. can maintain – quite genuinely – that he has committed no specific wrongdoing, has nothing to hide and is wearing no mask.¹⁵³ The nightmarish scenario for the Judaeo-Christian reader is that there are no grounds to doubt K.'s sincerity, but there is also no 'evidence' against him: the fault must therefore lie with the Court, but this cannot be proved.

Buddhism offers a way out of this impasse by noting the inherent self-delusion in any claim to being 'true to one's self' as there is no fixed self to which we can refer. The Court's arrest brings suffering because it is in effect an 'unmasking' of the self, but not in the manner of peeling off a layer of deception to reveal the truth below: it is the painful removal of the last bulwark that separates 'us' from everything 'else'. The arrest simply informs K. of this attachment to self, but rather than develop his powers of insight to reach a happy conclusion, he becomes defensive and perceives an attack of defamation: his reputation, his good name, his entire 'being' has come under threat and must be protected.

After the first mention of the word 'verhaftet', Warder Willem gives a simple but clear explanation of the situation. The warders cannot explain 'why' K. has been arrested (that is not their job, they cannot know the ins and outs of K.'s life): they are just there to inform K. of the proceedings now underway. In kindly terms that the average arresting officer would not use with a suspected criminal, Willem takes pains to reassure K. with some friendly

153 Lionel Trilling discusses the 'unmasking trend', an intellectual tendency to reveal the 'underlying truth' of the unconscious mind and search for 'deception and self-deception'. Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 141.

advice: 'Sie werden alles zur richtigen Zeit erfahren. Ich gehe über meinen Auftrag hinaus, wenn ich Ihnen so freundschaftlich zurede' (DP 9).

Reinforcing the message to wake up, Warder Franz adds, 'Sie werden noch einsehn, wie wahr das alles ist' (DP 10). K. will hopefully gain insight into the truth. K., however, pays no attention to these words ('achtete auf diese Reden kaum') and instead sets about annoying the warders with issues that are 'nutzlos', such as demanding a 'Verhaftbefehl' and producing his birth certificate (as if proof of being born exonerates one from guilt). The warders simply repeat their initial line – that they are there to 'keep watch', keep K. awake, focused on his state of 'Verhaftung' or attachment.¹⁵⁴

The theme of being awake is also served in the opening chapter by several references to a lack of 'Geistesgegenwart' and to 'Zerstreutheit', further evidence that K. leads his life without any clarity of thought. K. is thrown by the appearance of some bank staff in his apartment, to the extent that he then does not notice the supervisor leave: 'Viel Geistesgegenwart bewies das nicht und K. nahm sich vor, sich in dieser Hinsicht genauer zu beobachten' (DP 29). In addition, K. suggests to Frau Grubach that he could never have suffered such an arrest had he been in the bank, where he is alert: 'vor allem bin ich dort immerfort im Zusammenhang der Arbeit, daher geistesgegenwärtig, es würde mir geradezu ein Vergnügen machen dort einer solchen Sache gegenübergestellt zu werden' (DP 34). In other words, he attributes his being 'caught' to not being 'vorbereitet'. In a Buddhist sense, when we are in the throes of attachment ('im Zusammenhang'), we are at our most ignorant and unaware. It is not surprising that it is when the mind is at rest, not absorbed in working, desiring, seeking, that feelings of guilt might manifest themselves, that the first chinks of light can begin to dawn.

154 Wilhelm Emrich, however, describes the warders as 'simpleminded and arrogant', in *Franz Kafka* (Bonn: Athenäum-Verlag, 1958), p. 326.

As well as being there to awaken K., the warders advise K. to stay calm and collect himself for the great demands ahead, i.e. those of coming to terms with his 'arrest' or life of attachment: 'Wir raten Ihnen, zerstreuen Sie sich nicht durch nutzlose Gedanken, sondern sammeln Sie sich, es werden große Anforderungen an Sie gestellt werden' (DP 15). The term 'zerstreut' later figures at other key points in K.'s trial, showing that K. fails to keep a clear and focused mind. The supervisor's first address to K. wakes him from his reveries: 'Josef K.?' fragte der Aufseher, vielleicht nur um K.'s zerstreute Blicke auf sich zu lenken' (DP 20).

Josef K. is advised by the warders, and later the supervisor, to pay more attention to himself, and less to others or what is 'nebensächlich' (DP 22). K.'s instinct, however, is to look for an external solution to the problem at hand because he cannot conceive of personal wrongdoing. His subsequent repeated failures to gain access to the Court and secure any meaningful support show this line of reasoning to be misguided. The first casualty in K.'s arrest is his 'Vernunft'. After the initial brief exchange with the warders, he goes back into his room, which appears to the warders to be a smart move: 'Er scheint vernünftig zu sein' (DP 12). K. does not return there to engage in healthy introspection regarding his situation, but tries to find 'Legitimationspapiere'. In other words, K. looks for official documents from an external authority to establish his identity. It is as if he needs confirmation of who he is, a definition of his 'self', from a source outside himself. K. is made to look ridiculous by the 'Aufregung' he works himself into and the first papers he comes across, a trivial 'Radfahrlegitimation'.

It is unlikely also to be coincidental that one warder is called 'Willem', a name evoking the will, volition, intention, precisely the forces which drive kamma and perpetuate the cycle of life-death-rebirth enslaving those living in ignorance. Moreover, since the first person Josef K. speaks to is called Franz,

it is tempting to suggest that this warder carries some authorial presence, a wake-up call in effect from Franz Kafka to Josef K. This supports a Buddhist reading of the text, for in sending himself to nudge Josef K. out of his ignorant ways, Kafka sets up *Der Proceß* as an examination of how people live oblivious lives, full of frantic activity and driven by powerful emotions, but devoid of meaningful direction, understanding and insight. We are in need of constant, regular ‘awakenings’ to keep alive the reality of our ‘Verhaftung’, our attachment to desires.

By acknowledging guilt, the grounds for an arrest would melt away: there is no ‘Verhaftung’ once we see the truth of how attachment arises. For K., however, his arrest raises the questions ‘Why me?’ and ‘In whose name?’. In other words, K. assumes that man is born innocent but acquires guilt through specific wrongdoing. A Buddhist would say that from an early age man acquires guilt through attachment to the self, until awakening or insight to the truth offers the prospect of release.¹⁵⁵

3.2.2 The Court and its Law

*The defining teaching of the Buddhist tradition, that of non-self, is merely pointing out the limitations of this reflexive view we hold of ourselves. It’s not that the self does not exist, but that it is as cobbled-together and transient as everything else.*¹⁵⁶

As for the Court itself, the following description manages to encompass the impermanence of phenomena, the law of cause and effect, the ubiquity of attachment and the truth of the Dharma. K. is urged to understand that:

[...] dieser große Gerichtsorganismus gewissermaßen ewig in Schweben bleibt und daß man zwar, wenn man auf seinem Platz selbständig etwas ändert, den Boden unter den Füßen sich wegnimmt und selbst abstürzen kann, während der große Organismus sich selbst für die

155 ‘K.’s guilt in *The Trial* turns essentially on his attachment to his personal experience.’ Stanley Corngold, *The Necessity of Form* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 245.

156 Andrew Olendzki in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/limited-mask-self.

kleine Störung leicht an einer andern Stelle – alles ist doch in Verbindung – Ersatz schafft und unverändert bleibt (DP 160).

According to Advokat Huld, the Court does not allow any legal defences in its cases, and displays 'Verachtung' for lawyers. If K. really were faced with a criminal trial, this might raise the spectre of totalitarianism and infringements on individual rights, but the trial does not concern a specific act in K.'s life. It makes sense then that lawyers are not necessary when the charge is ignorance of our attachments. Guilt is the starting position and the trial has been brought to allow K. the opportunity to reflect and change to a plea of guilty. This cannot be achieved by the sharp practices of a legal team, but by the admission of one's cravings and by their elimination through a more mindful attitude. The Court's law does not uphold the idea of 'innocent until proven guilty', but rather 'guilty until proven enlightened'.

References to the Court and its law support the view that K. is not persecuted by a predatory, punitive authority, but confronted with a governing principle that is drawn to cases of suffering. The Dharma is not personal, but neutral, absolute, the same for all beings and all things. K. is not persecuted, is allowed to roam freely, and is only asked to pay more attention to his words and deeds. The problem is therefore that K. does not know how to 'read' the arrest or any of the 'signs' given, or alternatively that he tries to read the signs from a personal perspective.

Thomas M. Kavanagh's view as a semiologist describes the universe of *Der Proceß* as 'absurd' and compares Josef K. to a semiologist seeking a code to make sense of the confusing messages presented to him. He fails to restore order to a 'disintegrating world', and Kavanagh concludes that Kafkaesque man remains forever separated 'in an irretrievable alienation from all

meaning'.¹⁵⁷ Not all views of the novel lead to despair, however. Stuart Lasine attributes Josef K.'s guilt to his 'failure to live as a personally responsible, yet social, human being', and reads the Court as a 'sensitive moral agency designed to give K. the opportunity to undergo a moral metamorphosis; it is neither an oppressive, bureaucratic organization nor even a representative of strict, absolute justice without mercy'.¹⁵⁸

The next illocutionary tightrope K. walks comes during his visit to the 'Kanzleien'. K. is initially unimpressed by the poverty of the Court's offices, which lead him into a false feeling of superiority. He judges by appearance and concludes that there is nothing else to know about the law, dismissing the modest premises of his legal enemy, just as he looks down on the warders and the assembly at his hearing. K. is nevertheless upset by the oppressive atmosphere in the stuffy rooms and by the attendant's annoying habit of walking a couple of steps behind him, 'als ob er verhaftet vorgeführt werde' (DP 96). This appears to touch a nerve for he then declares that he has seen enough: 'ich will nicht alles sehn' (DP 96). This statement does not augur well for somebody gathering information and in fact K.'s mood deteriorates further. He has managed to penetrate into the bowels of a Court building, but 'er wollte nicht weiter eindringen' (DP 98). This is a clear indication of K.'s blinkered attitude to existence – he is unwilling to contemplate anything that falls outside his usual sphere of experience. In the attic rooms he finds many other people like himself (accused), but he feels no affinity with them or sympathy towards them. He considers his case special because he is innocent and the charge must be wrong or fabricated.

157 Thomas M. Kavanagh, 'Kafka's *The Trial*: The Semiotics of the Absurd', in James Rolleston, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Trial* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1976), p. 93.

158 Stuart Lasine, 'The Trials of Job and Kafka's Josef K.' in *The German Quarterly*, Vol 63, No. 2 (Spring 1990), p. 195.

He is gradually overcome by the close atmosphere in the airless corridors (recalling the scene of his first hearing and prefiguring Titorelli's cramped atelier) and starts to feel faint. He is helped by some officials, one of whom is significantly called 'der Auskunftgeber' (information officer), who can inform enquirers about the 'Gerichtswesen'. The holder of this position is authorised to answer questions about the Court and its law, lighting an illocutionary beacon which should satisfy K.'s curiosity: 'Er weiß auf alle Fragen eine Antwort' (DP 102).

Information that was not forthcoming from the warders or the supervisor is put within tantalising reach, but K. is too out of sorts to pay any attention and just wants to leave. Offered a potential key to the door of enlightenment, Josef K. can barely acknowledge the presence of the information officer and sits quietly there, 'mit seinen eigenen Angelegenheiten beschäftigt' (DP 103). The opportunity to gain intelligence, to dispel a few clouds of ignorance has been lost and does not properly return until it is too late, through the chaplain. It is ironic that after this point K. invests a lot of energy in trying to elicit titbits of information from people outside the law, that amount to mere opinion or gossip. When the prospect of genuine 'inside' information presents itself, he misses it.

This episode contrasts starkly with a comparable scene in *Das Schloß* where K. falls asleep during his meeting with Bürgel, missing the offer of a route into the Castle. However, whereas K. gains in stature and confidence after spurning the chance to firm up his attachment to the authorities, Josef K. continues on his downward spiral to an ignominious demise, for he has refused to listen to worthwhile guidance. As we will see later, K.'s 'epiphany' in Bürgel's room marks the closest any character of Kafka's will get to enlightenment by rejecting the temptation of influence. Josef K., on the contrary, is very weak in this respect and continually searching for favours: he

feels ill-at-ease under the rules of the Court and is desperate to escape to familiar territory, where the whims and desires of his own self hold sway and he can breathe freely again. In the later novel, K. replaces self-interest with insight, but Josef K. ignores insight in favour of self-preservation.

From a Western viewpoint, Josef K. knows nothing of the Court and its law, and this seals his fate, as explained by Christian Schärf: 'Gerade weil er das Gesetz nicht kennt und damit nicht anerkennt, ist er schuldig.'¹⁵⁹ But at the same time it seems that the law is distant and inaccessible: 'Das Gesetz ist völlig unerreichbar, unvorstellbar, seine Richter sind nicht von dieser Welt.'¹⁶⁰ Hence, a negative reading is likely because Josef K. is outside the law (an outlaw), and it is difficult to plot a route to the law which would allow K. to exonerate himself or atone for his wrongdoing, because the law is invisible. A Buddhist reading also condemns Josef K., but the law is simply a reflection of his status, a way of communicating his guilt to him. Josef K. is too wrapped up in his self to acknowledge his separation or isolation from his surroundings. The law is everywhere and it is not necessary to draw a map to find it. It is within Josef K. and without, and when he stops looking for it he will see it.

3.2.3 Consequences

*The root of human suffering is not sin, but our confusion about ego. We suffer because we believe in the existence of an individual self. This belief splits the world into 'I' and 'other'.*¹⁶¹

Before his trial has progressed very far, Josef K. has thus failed to heed any of the lessons related to his arrest or the authority behind it. The next stage is an enactment of one aspect of his life that has attracted the attention of the

159 Christian Schärf, *Franz Kafka: Poetischer Text und heilige Schrift* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) p. 118.

160 Ibid., p. 117.

161 Stephen Butterfield in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/feature/accusing-tiger.

authorities: his selfishness. In the chapter 'Der Prügler', K. stumbles across a disturbing punishment scene in a lumber room at work. He is implicated in the flogging being handed out to the two warders assigned to his case, because it was his complaint about them at his initial hearing that triggered the punishment. This pricks his conscience because at the end of the episode he wonders if he should have offered to take the place of the victims. For a man mystified by his arrest, here is evidence of behaviour (after the event) to raise feelings of guilt.

From many interpretive perspectives, the beating scene is uncomfortable because Josef K. is implicated in the punishment of the warders, but he did not order it. Between the complaint and the thrashing, there must be an agency which considers the case and decides the sentence: this has to be the Court, not Josef K. Regarding the charge, either Josef K. is guilty of wrongdoing, or he has been 'verleumd'et'. This reading has gaps which invite speculation because the specific charge is unknown, and thus a quest after 'meaning' is initiated.

From a Buddhist point of view, the illocutionary message of the beating also suggests a chain, that of cause and effect, but there is no insistence on meaning or justice as the 'process' is natural and not subject to interpretation or personalised readings. Action begets action, thought begets thought and nothing in existence can abide outside the chain of cause and effect.

When K. discovers the warders being beaten, it need not be taken as an example of a vindictive organisation harassing those underlings that step out of line, and doing so under K.'s nose to make him feel 'guilty'. It is just that K.'s unwholesome words (his wrong speech) result in suffering for people around him. K.'s feeble excuse that he had not asked for the warders to be punished has no influence on natural law: whatever is uttered bears a karmic load: 'Bringt er es dann allerdings öffentlich zur Sprache, dann muß die Strafe

erfolgen' (DP 109). As a result, suffering is 'ebenso gerecht als unvermeidlich' (DP 110).

K.'s guilt may be indisputable, but there is no pre-judgment about his case: he has simply been arrested, not condemned. We have seen how the warders are upbeat about K.'s prospects – if he pays a little attention to himself – and the 'Gerichtsdienner' states that there are 'keine aussichtslosen Prozesse' (DP 91), in contrast to K.'s uncle's gloomy prognosis. Josef K. has received a lesson on how karma works, but he fails to understand. He chooses instead to brush aside the stirrings of guilt and continue with his quest to have the arrest overturned.

The trial is about self-confrontation and K. determines his self by the choices he makes. This is similar to the Buddhist theory of Dependent Origination, for it suggests that all human beings are responsible for their own situations. This is where East and West diverge because the law in the West is bound up with notions of right and wrong, punishment and reward; from the Buddhist point of view, the law is a framework reflecting natural conditions in a neutral, impersonal world. For Buddhists, the Dharma is a truth stripped of decorations and enhancements, and enlightenment means that the individual realises how notions of right and wrong, punishment and reward are meaningless, virtual partitions within the universe that would not naturally arise. Sokel states that 'K.'s guilt remains impenetrable because the only access to it is interpretation, which is risk, instead of revelation, which gives it certainty'.¹⁶² This conclusion is quite the opposite to a Buddhist view, which would argue that neither interpretation nor revelation is the way, because each relies on external sources as points of reference. K.'s guilt would become

¹⁶² Walter Sokel provides a detailed discussion of K.'s guilt in 'The Programme of K.'s Court: Oedipal and Existential Meanings of *The Trial*' in Franz Kuna, ed., *On Kafka: Semi-Centenary Perspectives* (London: Paul Elek, 1976), pp. 1-21.

clear to him on attaining enlightenment through mindfulness of his attachment to selfhood, at which point his guilt would cease to be.

3.2.4 Guidance

*A monk sat meditating all day long. His Master asked him what he sought. 'My desire is to become a Buddha,' said the monk. The Master picked up a piece of brick and began to polish it on a stone. Asked to explain his action, the Master said that he wished to make a mirror. 'But no amount of polishing a brick will make it into a mirror,' said the monk. 'If so, no amount of sitting cross-legged will make thee into a Buddha,' said the Master.*¹⁶³

By the halfway point in the novel Josef K. has misunderstood the nature of his suffering, passed up the chance to learn about the Court and failed to accept the connection between his actions and their consequences. The next stage in the novel is the most densely filled with illocutionary messages and represents instances of guidance. A series of scenes unfolds with figures who offer Josef K. advice on how best to combat the trial. His uncle, Kaufmann Block and the 'Fabrikant' have walk-on parts and move the action along by suggesting new attachments as the solution to the faltering progress of his case. His uncle introduces Huld, the 'Fabrikant' leads Josef K. to Titorelli and Block opens up the option of multiple representations, effectively hedging his bets in a manner resonant with the 'zwanzig Hände' that Josef K. later regrets. The main figures are Huld and Titorelli, who dominate large tracts of narrative with their expansive accounts of the Court, its practices, and how best Josef K. should proceed.

Through his uncle, Josef K. finds himself 'attached' to the services of Huld, an ageing, bed-bound lawyer who pulls his strings of influence through acquaintances built up over a lifetime working on trials. In most respects Huld comes across as a very confusing, ambivalent figure whose 'help' seems to

¹⁶³ Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism*, p. 82.

consist in scaring his clients into submission (e.g. Block), or blinding them with convoluted explanations into trusting his judgment and experience. In spite of this, Huld's words can largely be taken at face value and offer useful insights into the workings of the Court.

In chapter seven, Huld makes an admission that is astonishing in its implications, for it undermines the legal profession he is part of: 'Die Verteidigung ist nämlich durch das Gesetz nicht eigentlich gestattet, sondern nur geduldet, und selbst darüber, ob aus der betreffenden Gesetzstelle wenigstens Duldung herausgelesen werden soll, besteht Streit' (DP 152). Lawyers are despised by the Court, but rather than deplore this state of affairs Huld agrees with the principle that the accused must personally come to terms with his 'Proceß' and take some responsibility for his defence. This is not to say that legal assistance is useless, for Huld believes it is crucial. It is at points such as this – where Huld's line diverges from the Court's – that the illocutionary message is left open to interpretation and argument. It is indisputable that the Court barely tolerates the actions and influences of the legal profession, for Huld explains how there is a separation between the accused and the defence lawyers, who are excluded from the hearings: '[S]ie müssen daher nach den Verhören, und zwar möglichst noch an der Tür des Untersuchungsziimmers den Angeklagten über das Verhör ausforschen und diesen oft schon sehr verwischten Berichten das für die Verteidigung taugliche entnehmen' (DP 154).

Tellingly, Huld rates 'persönliche Beziehungen' as the key benefit of hiring a lawyer. Much of Huld's advice is based on opinion and hearsay, and the occasional 'facts' about the Court are obscured by the long-winded, self-contradictory passages full of qualifications and disclaimers. The Buddhist reader can spot Huld's odd 'pearl of wisdom' because those remarks concern

the general nature of the 'Proceß' or 'Verhaftetsein', and are not offered as arguments to persist with the lawyer's services.

The illocutionary tightrope that Josef K. is invited to walk is to realise that he is responsible for himself: 'Man will die Verteidigung möglichst ausschalten, alles soll auf den Angeklagten selbst gestellt sein. Kein schlechter Standpunkt im Grunde' (DP 153). Buddhism is very clear on this point, for salvation or enlightenment can only be attained by the individual, and is not transferable through grace and favours. This idea is later picked up by the chaplain, who chides Josef K. for seeking too much 'fremde Hilfe'. It also echoes the comments of the warders, who urge Josef K. to focus on himself (his self) and not elsewhere.

Another significant point is that people recently charged waste time and effort in the early stages of their trial on 'Verbesserungsvorschläge'. The best course of action is calmly to take stock of the situation: 'Das einzig Richtige sei es, sich mit den vorhandenen Verhältnissen abzufinden' (DP 160). This advice from Huld is no doubt offered to Josef K. to stop him from meddling and have him leave the proceedings to the legal team. However, the basic message is clearly one of reflection (meditation) and understanding, not noise and action. Before his execution, Josef K. has a momentary insight when he realises he was wrong to grasp at life 'mit zwanzig Händen' and this seems to support Huld's assessment. The lawyer is using his description of the overwhelming power of the Court to scare Josef K. into submission, but this does not alter the fact that all the effort in the world will come to nothing if the accused fails to come to terms with his situation. This is another tightrope K. fails to negotiate.

K. eventually grows impatient with the perceived lack of progress made by Huld and decides to dispense with his services and defend himself. This could be a wise move, as the suffering experienced by the individual is caused

by his own thoughts and deeds born of ignorance. No amount of lobbying will get the individual off the hook of attachment. The only acceptable form of outside help comes in the form of measured, enlightened advice, but Huld can only offer 'persönliche Beziehungen'.

Huld's defence entails completion of an 'Eingabe', a declaration of innocence, and K. resolves to take on the submission himself after he fires Huld. He is soon frustrated by the endless task, for which 'das ganze Leben in den kleinsten Handlungen und Ereignissen in die Erinnerung zurückgebracht, dargestellt und von allen Seiten überprüft werden mußte' (DP 170). He needs to prove he has done nothing wrong, although he is unaware of the charge against him. The difficulty of encompassing the self, of trying to define exactly what and who we are, bears comparison with the teachings of the Dharma, where the principle of impermanence ties in with the idea of not-selfhood.

In choosing the name Huld (grace) for K.'s lawyer, Kafka underlines the counterproductive efforts of seeking outside help. The Buddha urged listeners to work out their own path to salvation with diligence and an open mind. The Buddha would act as guide, but not tread the path for you. The importance to Buddhism of self-help and independence finds an almost comic parody in Huld's boast that some lawyers hoist their clients up onto their shoulders and carry them off to the verdict. Looking to divine intervention for the answers and the efforts that will secure release is one further sign of ignorance.

K.'s meeting with Titorelli falls under the same category as Huld because he is still looking for ways to influence the Court. Titorelli can be bracketed with Huld in the sense that he is a figure who feeds off the Court, but who – for all his experience – is nevertheless relatively unenlightened. Like Huld, Titorelli recognises all the obstacles that stand in the way of the accused, but he is unable to offer Josef K. any guidance of a spiritual nature. Titorelli's great contribution to the novel is his explanation of acquittal options, or

‘release from suffering’ if expressed in Buddhist terms. Titorelli’s delivery style is similar to the convoluted arguments and layered disclaimers used by Huld; the gist of his message, however, has an illocutionary force which could strike Josef K. with some impact, but results in further miscommunication.

Titorelli’s long discussion of the various ways in which acquittal can be achieved fits in well with a Buddhist view of the world. The first way is a ‘real acquittal’, which is effectively the consequence of innocence, and as such is purely down to the individual: ‘Es gibt meiner Meinung nach überhaupt keine einzelne Person, die auf die wirkliche Freisprechung Einfluß hätte. Hier entscheidet wahrscheinlich nur die Unschuld des Angeklagten’ (DP 205). If K. really is innocent he needs no help: ‘Da Sie unschuldig sind, wäre es wirklich möglich, daß Sie sich allein auf Ihre Unschuld verlassen. Dann brauchen Sie aber weder mich noch irgendeine andere Hilfe’ (DP 205-206).

The fact that the Court is attracted to guilt means that nobody in its sights is innocent. If, in Buddhist terms, the guilt relates to attachment, it can be removed by seeing the Dharma: hence true acquittal is a real, if rare, possibility. When this happens, all the trial documentation is ‘vernichtet’ (DP 214), in the same way that cravings can be annihilated or let go of. In other words the Court cannot be mistaken about guilt, but the guilt can melt away to give enlightened freedom.

The other two types of acquittal are more common, however, as they deal with evasion and trickery, strategies in staving off a verdict or putting up a smokescreen. The ‘scheinbare Freisprechung’ involves having Titorelli vouch for the innocence of his client in a carefully worded text and doing the rounds with it among the judges he knows. The result could be acquittal, but in a passage characteristic of the qualifications and equivocations that tempt and tease K., this apparent acquittal is unsurprisingly not all it seems: ‘[Sie sind] nur scheinbar frei oder besser ausgedrückt zeitweilig frei. Die untersten

Richter nämlich, zu denen meine Bekannten gehören, haben nicht das Recht endgiltig freizusprechen' (DP 213). In other words, the path to cessation of suffering must be travelled by the individual. Salvation through the support of another, or faith in another, is not possible. We cannot attain enlightenment through a third party, so the Court does not sanction legal aid as it belongs to the type of 'fremde Hilfe' that can only obscure clear understanding of the Dharma.

The other feasible alternative for K. according to Titorelli is 'Verschleppung', where the devil is in the detail. Through 'ununterbrochener persönlicher Fühlung mit dem Gerichte' (DP 216), the trial gets bogged down in its initial stages. In other words, ignorance is perpetuated indefinitely and the 'personal' reason for this is clear. There is no pretence to contemplate what the trial might mean, and the individual just defers having to deal with the consequences of his arrest. This is the legal equivalent of sticking our head in the sand. Titorelli points out, however, that 'Der Proceß kann nicht stillstehn' (DP 217) – everything is subject to constant change, growth, decay. Simply slowing down one's lifestyle does not 'thin out' the suffering and make it disappear: it just lasts longer and delays the inevitable unwholesome fruit that our uninformed actions will bring.

3.2.5 Closure

*As long as we insist that meditation must be meaningful, we fail to understand it. We meditate with the idea that we're going to get something from it - that it will lower our blood pressure, calm us down, or enhance our concentration. And, we believe, if we meditate long enough, and in just the right way, it might even bring us to enlightenment. All of this is delusion.*¹⁶⁴

So far, as the novel reaches its conclusion, Josef K. has faced many challenges which have left him demoralised and disillusioned, but he has also failed to

164 Steve Hagen in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/-cushion/looking-meaning.

pass various tests where insights into his predicament have been revealed: at his arrest, inside the legal offices, at a flogging, and in the counsel of a lawyer and Court painter. The fifth stage and final opportunity for Josef K. to redeem himself and gain some awareness of his suffering comes through the 'Gefängniskaplan', who offers very direct words of advice, as well as teaching shrouded in the parable, *Vor dem Gesetz*.

When they first meet, the chaplain declares plainly that K.'s trial 'schlecht steht' (DP 288), but that a final verdict has yet to be reached. The unequivocal advice to him starts with 'Du mißverstehst die Tatsachen' (DP 289) and covers two lines of approach which are intertwined. The first is that Josef K. seeks 'zuviel fremde Hilfe' (DP 289), which is significantly 'nicht die wahre Hilfe' (DP 290). From a Buddhist point of view, the contrast of 'fremd' and 'wahr' suggests that true help must be 'self-help'. 'Fremd' can mean strange, alien, foreign and different, but the idiom 'ohne fremde Hilfe' indicates a situation where the individual has found his own way. This recalls the early advice of the warders that Josef K. should pay more attention to 'home truths'.

Triggered by Josef K. admitting that he can 'offen reden' with a figure he deems worthy of trust, the second element of the chaplain's counsel concerns self-delusion. In words reminiscent of the Buddha's exhortations not to take for granted even what he himself said, the chaplain stops K. in his tracks: 'Täusche Dich nicht' (DP 292). The parable follows, in which the man from the country comes unstuck in precisely the same way K. does, through a dependence on the view of a perceived authority.

K.'s characteristic self-absorption surfaces in his rash identification with the 'duped' man from the country and is picked up by the chaplain: 'Sei nicht übereilt [...] übernimm nicht die fremde Meinung ungeprüft' (DP 295). The parable has been recounted exactly as stated in the scriptures: 'Von Täuschung steht darin nichts' (DP 295). A long discussion ensues in which

Josef K. tries to gain a foothold in the 'truth' of the story, but he is never shown any solid ground by the chaplain. The advice is similar to the caution regarding 'fremde Hilfe': 'ich zeige Dir nur die Meinungen, die darüber bestehen. Du mußt nicht zuviel auf Meinungen achten' (DP 298). Opinions are expressions of selfhood, individual filters on phenomena which ultimately have no personal attachments or targets.

A reading of *Vor dem Gesetz* can be undertaken from any number of perspectives, and the parable lends itself to a Buddhist view as well as any other. An illocutionary Buddhist reading would pin the man's failure to enter the law on his ignorance. The door is there for him; he just needs to walk through, once the conditions are right (enlightenment has been achieved). If we wait for an invitation, we will be disappointed. We have to take care of our own salvation and work out what to do. Waiting for grace is not the answer, nor is any amount of supplication to any external entities.

Ingeborg Henel's reading of the parable sees it as the chaplain's attempt to enlighten K. to the fact that his arrest is not so much 'an action of the court, but the state in which Josef K. already finds himself at the outset of the novel'.¹⁶⁵ For Henel, the entrance reserved for the man from the country 'proves that it does not lead to a universal, generally valid law, comprehensible by reason and accessible to any rational person of good will'.¹⁶⁶ This interpretation may hold true if the law in question is 'earthly' or 'temporal', and used to help keep our selfish 'selves' in check. The Highway Code must be made available to all if we wish to keep our roads safe. However, if the law pertains to the nature of existence and how we can avoid suffering and achieve

165 Ingeborg Henel, 'The Legend of the Doorkeeper and Its Significance for Kafka's *Trial*' in James Rolleston, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Trial* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1976), p. 46.

166 Ibid., p. 48.

‘salvation’, ‘peace’ or ‘contentment’, these goals can only be attained outside attachment to selfhood, so each individual must work out his own path.

K., suffering from the same ignorance as the man from the country, feels that the doorkeeper tricks the man by holding out the possibility of entry. The chaplain, however, recounts different perspectives on the story, merely to show K. how confused and deluded we can become, if we fail to exercise our own judgment. Opinions will vary, but – crucially – the ‘scripture’ remains the same: ‘Die Schrift ist unveränderlich und die Meinungen sind oft nur ein Ausdruck der Verzweiflung darüber’ (DP 298). In short, we must strive after a measured understanding of the facts, of the truth, and not rely on hearsay or opinion. K. does not listen to the facts of the story, but jumps to conclusions, filtering information through his own perspective and experience: ‘Du hast nicht genug Achtung vor der Schrift und veränderst die Geschichte’ (DP 295).

This is another tightrope because Josef K. listens intently to the sea of conflicting interpretations before finally settling on a reading that he finds agreeable. No sooner has Josef K. come to rest on this view than the chaplain offers yet another ‘Gegenmeinung’. This technique will be examined as part of the section on perlocutionary effects, but at this juncture the chaplain’s objective (illocutionary) is to warn Josef K. about his reliance on external support. He has not been able to communicate this point to Josef K. whose final comment at the disappointing interpretation of the parable is left unanswered. The chaplain looks on K.’s suffering with ‘ein großes Zartgefühl’ but simply ‘nahm K.s Bemerkung schweigend auf, trotzdem sie mit seiner eigenen Meinung gewiß nicht übereinstimmte’ (DP 303).

The chaplain’s ‘Zartgefühl’ reflects his sadness at K.’s inability to comprehend the teaching. The long discussion, with all the winding alleys of interpretation and nuances of meaning, culminates in the ultimate distillation of the message of the Law: ‘man muß nicht alles für wahr halten, man muß es

nur für notwendig halten' (DP 303). This expresses the Buddhist teaching of The Three Universal Characteristics – impermanence, not-self and suffering. The reality of existence does not take into account the petty concerns of personal selves and each individual must realise that this core fact of impermanence is not compatible with ideals such as 'right', 'justice' and 'good'. These 'meaningful' principles have substance only in the hearts and minds of individuals, but have no foundation elsewhere. This is the illocutionary force of 'notwendig', as opposed to 'wahr'. K.'s parting remark ('trübselige Meinung') confirms his continued ignorance as he refuses to let go of the notion of his innocence: 'Die Lüge wird zur Weltordnung gemacht' (DP 303).

The tightropes that Josef K. passes along and falls from are like the entry to the law which the man from the country similarly fails to negotiate. Both the man and Josef K. suffer from delusions about the nature of the law – they believe that it is synonymous with justice and has definition, as a constant entity. Both the parable and the story of K.'s 'Proceß' show this to be a misconception. Eschweiler, in contrast, claims that the 'Licht der Wahrheit' which the man from the country sees shortly before he dies is Kafka's way of allowing his heroes a glimpse of 'den unverlöschlichen Glanz der Ewigkeit'.¹⁶⁷ The Buddhist reader, however, would point to the man's failing eyesight for he does not know 'ob ihn nur die Augen täuschen' (DP 295). This final yearning would then be a reflection of the self clinging to a lost cause, and the empty bid for affirmation of the law prefigures Josef K.'s dying grasp after intervention.

If we wish to salvage a salutary message from *Der Proceß* it rests in the words of admission K. utters before his death. K. seems to have learnt something from his failures as he experiences a moment of insight. His

167 Eschweiler, *Der verborgene Hintergrund*, p. 12.

‘Verstand’ condemns his lifetime habit of ‘grabbing at’ (attaching to) the world around him: ‘Ich wollte immer mit zwanzig Händen in die Welt hineinfahren und überdies zu einem nicht zu billigenden Zweck. Das war unrichtig, soll ich nun zeigen, daß nicht einmal der einjährige Proceß mich belehren konnte?’ (DP 308).

Before he is executed, however, his ignorance reasserts itself. Just as the man from the country hopes for admittance from the doorkeeper, K. sees a figure in a window and clutches at the prospect of a saviour come to help. In a description echoing his twenty grasping hands, he continues to reach out to the world, rather than reach within: ‘Er hob die Hände und spreizte alle Finger’ (DP 312).

From a Christian viewpoint, the ending is important because it frames the meaning of the story, and K.’s execution invites a particular interpretation of his whole life. Taken positively, K.’s death would have to incorporate atonement for sins and submission to a just fate, and the distant figure K. glimpses would assume prophetic proportions. John Kelly’s upbeat Christian view of *Der Proceß* sees a tale of guilt and forgiveness, where Josef K. is pursued by the Court but in the end ‘joyfully’ accepts its sentence: this would show that man cannot save himself, but the ‘Absolute’ will come and offer ‘its own peculiar salvation’.¹⁶⁸ A Buddhist reading would accept the condemnation of Josef K., but take it as a salutary lesson from which to learn (and move on from in a future life), not as an opportunity for supreme intervention.

Eschweiler reinstates the chapter ‘Ein Traum’ to stress Josef K.’s ‘entzückt’ reaction to death, as he realises ‘den Sinn seines Todes als einzige Möglichkeit zur Erlösung’.¹⁶⁹ This hopeful outcome is then translated to the final scene when he seems to ‘merge’ with his executioners in a ‘gewollte

¹⁶⁸ Kelly, p. 170.

¹⁶⁹ Eschweiler, *Der verborgene Hintergrund*, p. 89.

Identität von Geist und Körper’, representing an enlightened ‘Bejahung des Todes’.¹⁷⁰ In Buddhist terms, however, this late affirmation of death indicates a desperate bid to secure a ‘meaningful end’ for the self.

3.3 Tripwires (perlocutionary approach)

*When a Brahman came to the Buddha, bearing a gift in either hand, the Buddha’s greeting was the one word – ‘Drop it!’ The Brahman dropped the gift in his right hand and advanced. ‘Drop it!’ said the Blessed One, and the Brahman dropped the gift in his other hand. But as he advanced with empty hands, again the command rang out – ‘Drop it!’ The Brahman was enlightened.*¹⁷¹

Few of Kafka’s works seem to offer straightforward readings, but *Der Proceß* is a prime example of sustained deliberate perplexity and paradox, and as such it functions as an antidote to attachment to selfhood. Clayton Koelb undertakes a detailed study of the rhetorical gaps (aporia) in *Der Proceß*, focusing in particular on K.’s arrest, for which he points out there is no illocutionary act of arresting. Uncertainties arise from the unclear status of illocutions and perlocutions, creating a rhetorical moment which follows ‘a path of genuine pain through a depressingly real universe’.¹⁷² He concludes that ‘Kafka’s world rests on a foundation of rhetorical illocutions – assertions, requests, commands, and so on, that do not assert, request or command anything in particular but nevertheless direct the lives of his characters’.¹⁷³ For Koelb, Kafka’s writing creates these aporia to illustrate how problematic language shapes the world we live in, and the assumption is that this world is ambiguous and painful. A Buddhist analysis, however, would agree with the ambiguity, but stop short of linking it to pain, for that only comes if we attach to a need for clarity of meaning.

170 Eschweiler, *Der verborgene Hintergrund*, p. 91.

171 Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism*, p. 12.

172 Clayton Koelb, ‘Kafka’s Rhetorical Moment’ in *PMLA*, Vol 98, No. 1 (Jan 1983), p. 42.

173 Ibid., p. 45.

While readers find ambiguity and ambivalence in the Court, Josef K. wrestles with a confusing whirl of conflicting opinions which ‘häufen sich um das Verfahren bis zur Undurchdringlichkeit’ (DP 268). Walter Sokel thus talks of the ‘opaqueness’ of *Der Proceß*, as there is neither an external, revealed truth nor an inner truth, which results in Josef K. being torn apart.¹⁷⁴ But this obscurity is precisely the effect intended by Zen masters, such as Dogen, who want to break the reader’s grasp for sense: ‘Dogen’s writing, in places, is almost perversely opaque, to the point where one wonders whether he actually intends communication at all.’¹⁷⁵ So rather than identifying with Josef K.’s despair, a Buddhist would see a depiction – and ironic condemnation – of ignorance and intransigence despite the real prospect of salvation available through self-help.

Buddhism recognises in much of Kafka’s work the futility of grasping at what is not really there. Josef K.’s struggle to find his accusers and establish his innocence is a classic case of ignorance: at key moments in the story he has the chance to learn something about his situation and change the direction of the trial, if he understands the underlying reasons for the arrest. The fact that he fails to ‘awaken’ is not the fault of the external authorities, but the effect of his personal clinging.

3.3.1 Arrest

*We resist facing life as it is because that would mean abandoning our views of how we think it should be. The most basic form of resistance is wanting life to be other than it is.*¹⁷⁶

The opening chapter is a triumph of perlocutionary engineering for it teems with koan-like statements while the narrative moves along its linear

174 Walter H. Sokel, ‘The Opaqueness of *The Trial*’, in James Rolleston, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Trial* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1976), pp. 56-59.

175 Dogen, *Beyond Thinking: A Guide to Zen Meditation*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), p. xxxi.

176 Ezra Bayda in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/breaking-through-resistance.

illocutionary axis. We have seen how helpful advice falls on deaf ears as Josef K. struggles to come to terms with the bombshell of his arrest. He is also confronted with a series of 'Zen challenges' as outlined below which he again fails to respond to skillfully, because he approaches each task in too rational a manner, not befitting the extraordinary circumstances he finds himself in. For Sokel, the early morning arrest is like an ambush, when the ego is at its weakest through distraction, its guard down.¹⁷⁷ To underline the point, Sokel draws attention to a deleted passage, where K. refers to the moment of awakening as 'der riskanteste Augenblick am Tag'.¹⁷⁸ The moment of waking up is when we are most vulnerable: for Buddhism it is when we are at our most lucid, with attachments, habits and the usual conditioning switched off, with the ego not fully engaged, and the time is apposite to strike and allow a more enlightened, ego-light perspective to flourish.

Tempers are frayed in the early exchanges between Josef K. and the warders, and the end of one altercation does have a minor perlocutionary effect on K. When he is called to see the supervisor, it is with a loud shout that causes him to bang his teeth on the glass he is drinking from. This jarring moment is followed by an order to dress properly which K. takes particularly badly: 'Laßt mich, zum Teufel!' (DP 18). The warders were simply trying to make sure K. gave a good impression and their reaction to his rage is telling: "Es hilft nichts," sagten die Wächter, die immer, wenn K. schrie, ganz ruhig, ja fast traurig wurden und ihn dadurch verwirrten oder gewissermaßen zur Besinnung brachten' (DP 18). This unexpected, sad silence momentarily shakes K. and the combination of 'verwirren' and 'zur Besinnung bringen' is a fitting outcome for a Zen koan.

177 Walter H. Sokel, 'The Three Endings of Josef K. and the Role of Art in *The Trial*' in Angel Flores, ed., *The Kafka Debate: New Perspectives for Our Time* (New York: Gordian Press, 1977), p. 351.

178 Franz Kafka, *Der Proceß* (Apparatband), ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1990), p. 168.

Josef K. has barely recovered his poise before he stumbles into another perlocutionary ‘pothole’. He dismisses the supervisor as an ‘upstart’ lacking in authority, and announces that he will call Staatsanwalt Hasterer, expecting that the mention of this influential figure’s name will ‘hurry’ matters along. The supervisor permits the call, but questions the motive and this so wrongfoots K. that he then refuses to call after all, making himself look childish and petulant. With the warders and the supervisor, Josef K. is driven by aggression and challenges, and when no barriers are put in his way other than using good sense, he is left nonplussed. The same could almost be said of the entire ‘Proceß’, for K. is free to go about his normal business, but he struggles as if he had actually been put in chains. Josef K. seems to feed off adversity, but the Law is not there to attack K. (and prompt his defence): it is there to trigger awareness, through a pause in his usual flow of consciousness to allow a different perspective to emerge. As the novel progresses, the Court interrupts K.’s life with more perlocutionary episodes, but K. is generally unable to understand this non-aggressive tactic and consequently fails to re-orient himself to a more insightful view on life.

3.3.2 The Court and its law

*We all know what addiction is; we are primarily addicted to ME.*¹⁷⁹

Tripwires abound relating to experiences with the Court on its own territory.

The first opportunity for Josef K. officially to air his grievances comes through a hearing which, superficially at least, has all the trappings of a formal procedure. In koan fashion, however, the meeting does not provide a forum from which he can argue his case, but an obstacle blocking the path ahead. Josef K. has some initial success for he heeds the early advice about the Court being attracted by guilt: he heads off for his first official meeting on the

¹⁷⁹ Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape* (London: Element, 2003), p. 40.

appointed day without knowing the exact time, but assuming it would be whenever he showed up.

Josef K. learns by telephone of the day and location of the hearing, but not the exact time or place. He assumes that the proceedings will start at 9am and heads off accordingly, but soon realises that the directions are inadequate as he struggles to find the entrance. This prefigures the chaplain's parable, where the man from the country tries to gain access to the law through the right doorway. Josef K. remembers Willem's words about the Court being attracted to guilt, and simply enters a room, assuming that his choice will be the right one. This is effectively an admission of guilt, for he does ultimately find the way to the assembly: the Court and his guilt find each other. On arrival at the hearing, however, K. soon falls back into his old habits and reverts to his aggressive, self-centred character, ready to attack the Court and oblivious to his own shortcomings.

As a Zen master might try to wrongfoot his students, an official at the first hearing opens proceedings by addressing Josef K. as 'Zimmermaler' (DP 61). This error could be interpreted as evidence of the shoddy preparations of the Court, and potentially of a case of mistaken identity, hence a wrongful arrest. However, it could also be viewed as the classic opening gambit of Court officials trying to 'help' K. see the error of his attachment to identity. Josef K. rises to the bait and launches into a tirade against the Court, not only protesting his own innocence, but suggesting that such ill-informed thuggery has ruined many others before him.

On arrival at the hearing, K. had in fact decided to be circumspect and measured ('mehr zu beobachten, als zu reden'), but he is easily tempted into delivering a long dramatic tirade to the assembly, punctuated with theatrical gestures and table-thumping: '[ihn] freute das angespannte Aufhorchen der ganzen Versammlung, in dieser Stille entstand ein Sausen, das aufreizender

war als der verzückteste Beifall' (DP 69). Carried away by his 'Rednererfolg', K. lambasts the Court for a deliberate attack on 'mein öffentliches Ansehen' (DP 66). K. has not heeded the warders' earlier advice to stop moaning and take a closer look at himself: 'machen Sie keinen solchen Lärm mit dem Gefühl Ihrer Unschuld' (DP 22). Again, K. passes up a chance to stay quiet and reflect.

It is significant from a Buddhist point of view that the issue that causes Josef K. to lose control is specifically the question of his self, his identity. He is proud of his elevated position at the bank which forms an integral part of his idea of self-worth. The perlocutionary effect here is to shake the foundations of his being, and the repeated assaults on K.'s fixed view of himself serve to communicate the folly of attaching to an illusory absolute. Needless to say, Josef K. fails this test and despite the regular illocutionary signposts to keep him on the right path K. sleepwalks through all the trials and tribulations until his eventual demise (as if he had never awoken on the morning of the arrest).

3.3.3 Consequences

*The teachings of the Buddha are: Let go and open to your world. Realize that trying to protect your territory [...] is fraught with misery and suffering.*¹⁸⁰

Gates figure prominently in Buddhist texts, symbolising portals to other dimensions of understanding, but it is never a matter of simply stepping through.¹⁸¹ The practice of meditation reveals to the individual a 'self-free' room in which the reality of the present moment can be experienced: 'Zazen [Zen sitting meditation] is the dharma gate of enjoyment and ease; it is undivided practice-enlightenment.'¹⁸² By leaving one's ego at the door, one

180 Chödrön, p. 70.

181 Good examples of this can be found in *Two Zen Classics: The Gateless Gate and The Blue Cliff Records*, translated by Katsuki Sekida (Boston: Shambhala, 2005).

182 Dogen, p. xxviii.

crosses the threshold to a more enlightened realm, and koans can help in this process.

Similarly, Kafka's doors often mark breaches in the laws of space and time, leaving his characters nonplussed and unable to hold onto conventional logic. In the opening chapter Josef K. loses his self-control when entering Fräulein Bürstner's room, fascinated by the young lady's private chamber and quite forgetting the reason he is there (the arrest). Titorelli's cramped studio has hidden doors leading to the law chambers, and the doors to the venue for his initial hearing are sealed after his arrival, as if his presence creates special conditions. Another key 'gate' is the entrance to 'Das Gesetz' described by the chaplain. The man from the country is stumped by the paradox of the open entrance and verbal warning of formidable interior doorkeepers. Unwilling to walk away, but unable to progress without official sanction, he typifies the ignorant individual striking matches in the dark.

The lumber room flogging also has perlocutionary elements that defy interpretation as K. opens the door to a scene of cause and effect, thereby continuing the theme of stepping through 'portals' into new dimensions. He is taken by surprise, but manages to find some composure and extricate himself from the predicament, without committing to assisting the poor warders. The next day he opens the door to the lumber room expecting to see it as it was originally, but he is dumbstruck to see the three men inside in exactly the same pose, as if time had frozen until K.'s entrance allowed the punishment to continue. This flouting of the rules of physics can be considered a perlocutionary device, for it completely throws Josef K. ('wußte er sich nicht zu

fassen') and he loses composure: 'Sofort warf K. die Tür zu und schlug noch mit den Fäusten gegen sie, als sei sie dann fester verschlossen' (DP 117).¹⁸³

Josef K. has responded poorly to this invasion of irrationality, as he simply wants the scene wiped from his memory. However, if this scene had been a lesson set by a Zen master, it would be considered successful as K. sets off home at the end of the day 'müde und gedankenlos', precisely the intended effect – the emptying of the mind, the cessation of thinking.

Following the episode in the lumber room, he is unable to concentrate in the office. His earlier trumpeted 'presence of mind' at work is destroyed by the image of the warders suffering. In effect, even though they are not literally keeping watch over him, the warders are fulfilling their duty of keeping K. aware of his 'Verhaftung', and dragging him out of the orbit of his old, unreformed ways. K. cannot simply 'lose himself' in his work any longer.

3.3.4 Guidance

*The process of finding the truth may not be a process by which we feel increasingly better and better. It may be a process by which we look at things honestly, sincerely, truthfully, and that may or may not be an easy thing to do.*¹⁸⁴

Advokat Huld and Maler Titorelli both overwhelm K. with a deluge of information about the Law, and also succeed in tying him up in knots of confusion. The conversations with lawyer and artist explore strategies for dealing with the trial and taking on the Court, but their declarations and explanations serve to perplex rather than inform. From a Zen perspective, these messages represent tripwires warning the individual against taking up a quest as a 'personal way' to happiness. The path to non-suffering is not

¹⁸³ A similar effect is achieved when K. skips out of the introductory meeting with Huld to forge an alliance with Leni. In the narrative flow, it seems as if he is just moments with her but his uncle later upbraids him for disappearing 'stundenlang' (DP 146).

¹⁸⁴ Adyashanti in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/end-your-world.

travelled by measuring the distance or direction of the steps made (for there is no fixed destination), but by being mindful of how the steps are made, i.e. without attachment to self: the steps to enlightenment leave no karmic footprint.

Huld spins a number of bewildering koans, but one particular passage is a good example of the difficulty of interpretation that accompanies his words of 'wisdom'. After telling K. that the Court frowns upon the involvement of a defence and thus tries to isolate the arrested person so they can concentrate on themselves, Huld unleashes a series of justifications for the defence which start off promisingly before falling short of conviction. One such presentation, delivered in a dense unbroken passage of 'erlebte Rede', takes Josef K. on a rollercoaster ride with the following twists and turns, raising and dashing hopes in equal measure. First, the defence plays no official role in any trial, but in fact the defence is 'notwendig'. Having said that, 'Das Verfahren ist nämlich im allgemeinen nicht nur vor der Öffentlichkeit geheim, sondern auch vor dem Angeklagten' (DP 154). The accused has no 'Einblick' into the proceedings, but the defence comes to the rescue. However, since the defence is not allowed into the hearings, it must rely on inaccurate briefings from the accused. This is where the defence's contacts start to play a part.

The discussion of the general merits and drawbacks of hiring a defence lawyer move seamlessly into more specific considerations, such as Huld's own credentials, his relationship with Court officials and the way to approach a trial – whatever the topic, the same pattern of raised and dashed hopes is repeated: 'In solchen und ähnlichen Reden war der Advokat unerschöpflich. Sie wiederholten sich bei jeden Besuch. Immer gab es Fortschritte, niemals aber konnte die Art dieser Fortschritte mitgeteilt werden' (DP 164). The perlocutionary effect on Josef K. is redolent of Zen as he is rendered 'ganz ermattet' by all this talk. He cannot fathom whether Huld is trying to create

‘Trost oder Verzweiflung’ (DP 165), but Josef K. is suspicious of the lawyer’s ‘unaufhörlich hervorgehobenen persönlichen Beziehungen zu den Beamten’ (DP 165) and decides that he would be better off representing himself. In this case it would appear that K. has made the right decision for the wrong reasons: he feels uncomfortable relying on Huld’s ‘personal contacts’, but instead of seeing that these connections (attachments) are part of the problem not the solution, he merely chooses to substitute Huld’s contacts for his own.

The brief hiatus in seeking ‘fremde Hilfe’ is short-lived, however, for K. finds it tough preparing his ‘Eingabe’ and loses focus at the bank. One of K.’s clients notices the change in his demeanour (‘bedrückt’, DP 179) and puts him in touch with a painter called Titorelli, who is said to be well-connected and knowledgeable about the Court. Aside from the negative Buddhist overtones that come with the notion of attachment, the ‘Verbindung’ that Josef K. seeks with Titorelli demonstrates his inability to follow the ‘pointers’ of earlier Court koans. After hearing Huld’s paradoxical and baffling speeches, Josef K. could have eschewed a legal defence and launched a move in a more enlightened direction. But in fact, Josef K. has merely decided to dispense with the person of Huld as a defence lawyer, yet persist with the idea of defending himself, i.e. seeking justice for wrongful arrest. The episode with Titorelli is another attempt to mount a defence, which in Zen terms is a misguided quest to rationalise the irrational: koans urge us to explore and embrace the illogical and unconventional, rather than trying to fit everything into an orderly pattern. In other words, K. keeps trying to hammer his square peg into a round hole, when it may just be the case that the peg and hole are not meant to correspond.

The scenes with the painter have a twofold perlocutionary effect, in terms of the issues discussed and the environment of the meeting. The latter causes K. several shocks for the atelier is so small the two men are virtually sitting on

top of each other. Furthermore, K. realises at the end of the meeting that a door behind the bed leads directly to more Court offices. This adds to the somewhat surreal atmosphere surrounding the Court, as it appears increasingly shrouded in enigmatic, ‘unnatural’ occurrences, producing koans at every point of contact with its human subjects, capturing the combined essence of impermanence, not-self and suffering.

The scene with Titorelli occasions a deep discussion of life under the Court, and Josef K. sits close by Titorelli in the cramped quarters, hanging on every word (as he will later do in his conversation with Block). He is captivated by his craving for information on the Law and confounded by his inability to comprehend the mysterious ways of the authorities. Much of Titorelli’s description of the Court has a Zen feel to it, shot through with disclaimers and disqualifications, and the most prominent example is the explanation of how to deal with the state of being under arrest. The long and detailed account holds illocutionary value, in that it is informative of how the Court works, but for Josef K. it would appear that its perlocutionary effect exerts the greatest influence on him because his most noteworthy reactions are triggered by features of Titorelli’s account which do not relate specifically to the matters in question, but which are delivered in a particular form.

The preamble to the discussion of ‘Befreiung’ options contains a mixture of illocutions (information) and perlocutions (paradoxes and counterarguments) woven together in such a way that they offer guidance on how to avoid suffering. Titorelli opens the meeting by asking K. bluntly if he is ‘unschuldig’ (DP 200), and K. duly proclaims his complete innocence with ‘Freude’. When Titorelli accepts this declaration and concludes the situation is ‘einfach’, K.’s mood darkens because he believes the painter is as ignorant as ‘ein unwissendes Kind’ of the machinations of the Court.

The downward spiral continues when Titorelli uses the word ‘unschuldig’ for a third time, pointing out this is the ‘Hauptsache’ in the whole affair. By the time Titorelli has told K. the Court is never mistaken about guilt and K. would have more success pleading his innocence before paintings of the judiciary than the judges in the flesh, K.’s ‘Freude’ has evaporated and all he can do is mutter to himself. In an aside that sums up the painter’s methods, Titorelli tells K. ‘halb im Scherz, halb zur Erklärung’ (DP 202) that the noisy girls outside his studio also belong to the Court: ‘es gehört ja alles zum Gericht’ (DP 202) – the half-serious, half-joking remark is also half-illocutionary and half-perlocutionary. The final blow comes when Titorelli notes that Josef K. has ‘keinen Überblick über das Gericht’ (DP 202), but that need not matter because he is already ‘unschuldig’.

Hitherto, K. has not seen the advantage of being ‘unschuldig’ because he has focused on the ways of the Court and, unable to understand them, he cannot work out how to ‘place’ his innocence in relation to the Law. Titorelli seems to back this up by confirming that the Court will not hear ‘Beweisgründe’ for innocence. This would rule out any chance of an appeal, but Titorelli introduces the crucial distinction of what proof is brought before the Court, and what is presented to the network of support services ‘hinter dem öffentlichen Gericht’. This is of huge interest to K. and the conversation takes a hopeful turn: ‘Waren die Richter durch persönliche Beziehungen wirklich so leicht zu lenken, wie es der Advokat dargestellt hatte, dann waren die Beziehungen des Malers zu den eitlen Richtern besonders wichtig und jedenfalls keineswegs zu unterschätzen’ (DP 203).

In true Zen style, the contradiction is not long coming for Titorelli notices with some concern (‘Ängstlichkeit’) the twinkle in K.’s eye at the possibility of influencing the ‘Proceß’ through his ‘Kreis von Helfern’: ‘Der Maler beobachtete die Wirkung, die seine Erklärung auf K. gemacht hatte’ (DP 203). This

‘Wirkung’ is perlocutionary for K. has applied to Titorelli’s words a logic that is inappropriate. K. will be disabused of this false hope at a later juncture when he tells Titorelli that there are contradictions in the painter’s description of how the Court operates.

Before K. is handed his next disappointment by Titorelli’s rebuttal, there are still plenty of other peaks and troughs in the exchange between them. K.’s hopes are raised by Titorelli’s access to the ‘backstreets’ of the Law, where deals can be made and alliances forged. K. learns that Titorelli has inherited his position, effectively making it ‘unerschütterlich’, so he can occasionally risk helping ‘einem armen Manne, der einen Proceß hat’. K. probes further, sensing an opportunity for aid, oblivious to the implication that he is the ‘poor man’ in the example. Titorelli continues his account with ‘in Ihrem Fall’, thereby disabusing K. of this illusion. A crushing blow is then dealt by the fifth mention of the key term ‘unschuldig’, which almost assumes a perlocutionary effect of its own because it speaks volumes beyond the reference to ‘innocence’: ‘Die wiederholte Erwähnung seiner Unschuld wurde K. schon lästig’ (DP 205). Ironically, what irks K. is not any doubt regarding his innocence, but actually the repeated assumption that he is indeed innocent; in other words, the position he has maintained all along.¹⁸⁵

Josef K. shakes off this setback by reasoning that Titorelli’s contacts offer more promise than Huld’s, so he is prepared to keep listening. The description of the ‘Befreiung’ options that follows is both an illocutionary masterclass in the perils of clinging to selfhood and a textbook delivery of a series of koans that send K. reeling by the end of the session.

185 Corngold picks up on K.’s intransigence: ‘The attitude which Kafka solicits and which Josef K. fails to provide is one of openness to the possibility of guilt.’ Stanley Corngold, ‘The Question of the Law, the Question of Writing’, in James Rolleston, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Trial* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1976), p. 101.

The first option of ‘wirkliche Freisprechung’ is ideal, but Titorelli has regrettably ‘nicht den geringsten Einfluß auf diese Art der Lösung’ (DP 205) and, to make matters worse, neither does anybody else. The only factor taken into consideration by the Court is (once again) ‘die Unschuld des Angeklagten’. Two further instances of the term ‘Unschuld’ explain that K. does not actually need any help if he is truly innocent. Although at face value Titorelli’s statement is intended to inform (illocutionary), its function in the text acquires perlocutionary effect: ‘Diese geordnete Darstellung verblüffte K.’ (DP 206). He recovers by pointing out perceived inconsistencies (‘Sie widersprechen sich’), but his ‘logical’ approach to the koan is brushed aside. The painter’s response to the challenge is a knowing smile worthy of a Zen master (‘lehnte sich lächelnd zurück’), for Titorelli is clear in his own mind that everything adds up. K. senses that the discussion has left the sphere of rationality and moved into uncharted territory: ‘Dieses Lächeln erweckte in K. das Gefühl, als ob er jetzt daran gehe, nicht in den Worten des Malers sondern in dem Gerichtsverfahren selbst Widersprüche zu entdecken’ (DP 206). A Zen master would be encouraged to see his pupil starting to scratch surface reality and discover the underlying impermanence.

K. presses on undaunted and points out the paradoxes he has found, but Titorelli’s reply is typical of another classic Zen strategy as he completely wrongfoots K. by changing the terms of reference of the discussion: ‘Es ist hier von zwei verschiedenen Dingen die Rede, von dem was im Gesetz steht, und von dem was ich persönlich erfahren habe’ (DP 206). The opposition of ‘Gesetz’ and ‘persönlich’ is crucial from a Buddhist point of view, for it implicates person/self as the source of resistance, suffering and ultimately ‘Schuld’. K.’s hopes are crushed by Titorelli having no experience in his lifetime of ‘wirkliche Freisprechung’, so he wonders about earlier times, only to meet with the same response. Here, K.’s despair is clear to see as he clings to the faintest of hopes,

through accounts of yore, much like tales from religious scriptures. His expectations of release (salvation) have shifted from conviction to faith, and Titorelli's subsequent use of the term 'Legende' foreshadows the teaching that K. will receive from the chaplain. K.'s quibbling with the painter resembles the man from the country's attempts to talk his way past the doorkeeper into the Law. Another aspect of the conversation which prefigures the meeting with the chaplain is K.'s willingness to look past contradictions and accept whatever opinions are presented, in order to broaden his chances of getting help, the very thing he is cautioned against doing.

Titorelli has already effectively confirmed the only way out of the arrest: innocence. K. thus abandons the 'koan' on actual acquittal and turns to the next option, at which point Titorelli draws K.'s attention to the room's stuffiness and invites him to remove his coat. K. becomes aware of a feeling of nausea, which recalls the reaction he had when he last visited Court attic rooms – he was close to losing consciousness and had to be ushered out before he could learn anything from the information officer. The following part of the discussion concerns how to delay the inevitable (unfavourable) sentence. In contrast to his faint in the attic rooms, K. struggles through the heat and physical discomfort – 'unbequem und ungesund' (DP 209) – to learn more about evasions which will be spiritually uncomfortable and unhealthy for him. It is at this juncture that we are told that Titorelli's attic has a window that does not open – a 'fake' aperture for decoration and some little illumination, but affording neither relief nor release, much like the acquittal options to be discussed.

The second 'Befreiung' koan starts with typical ambiguity as Titorelli declares the remaining two options are both 'erreichbar, natürlich nicht ohne Mühe' (DP 211). The only 'effortless' solution is actual acquittal. The core element of the 'scheinbare Freisprechung' is the guarantee of innocence that

Titorelli would promise to 'hawk' around his judge acquaintances. On the downside, K. feels that he would create a burden for the painter, but the initial prospects seem bright as Titorelli outlines the main features of the deal: 'nicht mehr viel Hindernisse', 'Zeit der höchsten Zuversicht', 'es bedarf jetzt keiner besonderen Mühe mehr' (all DP 212), and most attractively, 'Sie aber treten aus dem Gericht und sind frei' (DP 213).

As befits a koan, all is not so simple and there must be hurdles to overcome. K. has learnt something from his experience with the Court and approaches the term 'frei' with an element of scepticism ('zögernd'). Titorelli duly applies the perlocutionary disclaimer: 'aber nur scheinbar frei oder, besser ausgedrückt, zeitweilig frei' (DP 213). The circles Titorelli moves in have 'lower' judges who cannot make the release 'endgiltig': 'dieses Recht hat nur das oberste, für Sie, für mich und für uns alle ganz unerreichbare Gericht' (DP 213). The term 'zeitweilig' achieves a similar effect to the Buddhist 'impermanence'.

The next comments provided by Titorelli set out the difference between actual and apparent acquittals, in terms which could not sound more Buddhist if they were written by a Zen master. The crucial point concerns the legal documents or evidence which build the case against the accused. When the actual acquittal is passed (i.e. the arrested party is declared innocent), all the files disappear and 'alles ist vernichtet' (DP 214); with the apparent acquittal, the existing papers are not altered, but extra documents are added to mark the statement of innocence, hence the case file is 'bereichert' (DP 214). The distinction here is no less significant than the way in which the self is viewed from Buddhist and Western perspectives. Attachment to self is seen as the main barrier to enlightenment by Buddhists, so it follows that suffering is decreased as the reliance on self is reduced, much as a hot-air balloon rises when ballast is thrown overboard. A Christian approach, for example, does not

seek to dispense with attachment to selfhood, but encourages it, not in the 'greedy' sense of 'selfish', but in the sense that the individual's outlook is still centred in selfhood. Jesus is there to save each one of us as we are, and the bond between self and Christ is the way of faith and the path to redemption. The 'enrichment' of selfhood with such a relationship to Jesus is positive, and contrasts with the stark advice issued by ninth-century Zen master Linji: 'If you meet the Buddha, kill him.'¹⁸⁶ The use of the word 'bereichert' to describe the extra 'ballast' added to the Court's case files fits in well with paradoxical Zen statements that appear rational but hide pitfalls. A case that is 'rich' with proofs of innocence undermines itself with its weight of evidence: innocence is not quantifiable.

To underscore this message, during which K. has significantly and uncharacteristically not interjected even once, Titorelli relates how the case may seem to disappear from sight, but can resurface at any moment, sometimes even before the acquitted person has returned home: 'Es geht kein Akt verloren, es gibt bei Gericht kein Vergessen. Eines Tages – niemand erwartet es – nimmt irgendein Richter den Akt aufmerksamer in die Hand, erkennt daß in diesem Fall die Anklage noch lebendig ist und ordnet die sofortige Verhaftung an' (DP 214).

The final blows of the apparent acquittal leave K. 'zusammengesunken' (DP 215). The potentially endless loop of 'Freisprechung' and 'Verhaftung' (similar to the samsara of life-death-rebirth) dumbfounds K. and his presence in the text is curtailed to 'schwieg' and 'nickte' (DP 216). Baffled silence is often the response to a particularly inscrutable koan, so K.'s quiet resignation indicates a successful perlocutionary hit.

¹⁸⁶ Judith Blackstone and Zoran Josipovic in Titmuss, p. 274.

The third ‘acquittal’ koan reveals the conditions for ‘Verschleppung’, which centre on keeping the trial tied up ‘im niedrigsten Proceßstadium’ (DP 216). The advantage is that there will be no sudden re-arrests (the individual is still officially under arrest), but the drawback is that there must always be some movement in the case, however trivial. This echoes the first Universal Characteristic of impermanence and adds another layer of paradox to the koan for the only way to stop the trial from progressing is to keep it moving. The trick of keeping the case mired in bureaucracy comes with serious consequences for both the accused and his helper – they are in ‘ununterbrochener persönlicher Fühlung mit dem Gerichte’ (DP 216). The combination of ‘unbroken’ and ‘personal’ rings alarm bells for the Buddhist reader.

Titorelli runs through more details on ‘Verschleppung’, but K. has already stood up to leave. In the way that a Zen master might ask his student whether he has understood the lesson, Titorelli hopes his insights (koans) have been useful: “Oja,” sagte K., dem von der Anstrengung mit der er sich zum Zuhören gezwungen hatte der Kopf schmerzte’ (DP 218). K. is not the first person to have suffered a headache when presented with baffling koans, but Titorelli tries to simplify matters by concluding that both ‘scheinbare Freisprechung’ and ‘Verschleppung’ would prevent ‘Verurteilung’. K. counters that they also prevent an actual acquittal, which gains Titorelli’s approval: ‘Sie haben den Kern der Sache erfaßt’ (DP 218). Unfortunately, this only indicates that K. has grasped the (superficial) illocutionary message rather than been enlightened by its perlocutionary implications.

The scene closes with Titorelli suggesting they keep ‘in Verbindung’, and the Buddhist reader would note the dangers inherent in cultivating attachments. The chapter ends after a series of unexpected turns, all of which confuse K., from buying a range of identical paintings and departing by

climbing out over Titorelli's bed through to the neighbouring attic rooms. After the verbal koans, these physical koans underline the non-sense of following Titorelli's instructions.

3.3.5 Closure

*Buddhism is about getting unbrainwashed. It's about waking up from this hypnotic state of subservience to ego.*¹⁸⁷

As K.'s 'Proceß' has advanced he has faced a number of situations which have all caused him to reflect on his case, either by shock tactics (home arrest, lumber room beating) or through irrational argumentation ('Zimmermaler', Huld's unsanctioned but essential defence, Titorelli's binding personal guarantees that don't bind to anything). K. has failed to make any headway after all these promptings and has reached such a critical stage that the Court arranges a final warning, in the figure of the prison chaplain. We have seen above how the chaplain offers K. some unequivocal advice (illocutionary), but the text also allocates to the chaplain the novel's clearest teaching via perlocutionary means, the parable *Vor dem Gesetz*.

Perlocutions are about effect and reaction, rather than meaning, so it is worth examining how K. is 'prepared' for the parable. K. has ostensibly gone to the cathedral to meet a client, so an impromptu Court hearing is the last thing on his mind (although clearly his trial is also the first thing on his mind).

The meeting in the cathedral begins properly when the chaplain calls K.'s name. By this stage, the burden of upholding his good name, of hanging on to the notion of a closed, coherent self, has started to weigh heavily. The chaplain seeks to confirm his identity as Josef K., and K. replies in the affirmative, noting to himself: 'er dachte daran wie offen er früher immer seinen Namen genannt hatte, seit einiger Zeit war er ihm eine Last' (DP 288). His profession

¹⁸⁷ Kongtrül, p. 81.

of 'Unschuld' has become a millstone rather than an anchor. If a specific charge had been brought against K. he could fend off an attack by pointing to his good character or an alibi. The koan strategy of the text is to leave the charge 'open', and yet apply the arrest – this triggers a self-defence mechanism, but K. struggles to get a 'grip' without a specified accusation to counter. This is the perlocutionary message that speaks through all the paradoxes in the novel – the instinct of the self is to defend itself, but because the point of attack is so vague, the defence cannot focus. The counter-intuitive response would be to accept the attack in order to negate it – ignorance is dispelled by acknowledging the 'guilt' of attachment to self. The Zen koan creates a situation where the individual's self and cherished values become a burden or liability. The Court has made some headway in this respect for K. now feels suffering at the mere mention of his name.

The perlocution continues with the chaplain explaining that he has summoned K., but K. talks of the appointment with the Italian client, having forgotten the other unannounced incursions of the Court into his life. The chaplain tells him to ignore 'das Nebensächliche', much as a Zen master tries to 'clear' a student's mind. The chaplain asks K. if he is holding a prayer book, but it is a city map, so he instructs K. to throw it away as irrelevant. This double instance of incongruous question-response (mondo style) leads to the revelation that his case is going badly, and the perlocutions switch from incongruity to ignorance.

The next element of the conversation consists of a densely packed series of exchanges which culminate in the revelation of the 'scripture', *Vor dem Gesetz*. At every step K. faces an issue in relation to which his view is at odds with the position of the chaplain. It is furthermore interesting to note how these issues correspond to The Four Noble Truths, a teaching aimed at enlightening those in ignorance.

First, their discussion centres on 'Schuld': K. insists on his innocence, but justifies it by referring to a generic human lack of guilt: 'Wie kann denn ein Mensch überhaupt schuldig sein. Wir sind hier doch alle Menschen, einer wie der andere' (DP 289). Since the arrest, K. has trained his thoughts on the notion of guilt, and not his person, which is held to be unassailable. He understands the general concept of guilt, but cannot relate it particularly to himself. The chaplain responds by re-attaching the two parts of guilt and self: 'Das ist richtig [...] aber so pflegen die Schuldigen zu reden' (DP 289). Guilt is therefore that of selfhood – it is not a moral, social or criminal wrongdoing, but a spiritual or existential one.¹⁸⁸ This echoes The First Noble Truth: there is suffering. K. still does not learn and fails another perlocutionary test.

The next topic under discussion is 'Vorurteil', for K.'s paranoia sees the world against him. His conspiracy theories come from his self-defence mechanism and an ego-centric world view. This ties in with The Second Noble Truth: the source of suffering is desire or attachment. The chaplain sets him straight again, in words which pre-empt the parable: 'Du mißverstehst die Tatsachen' (DP 289). The verdict in K.'s type of trial is not decided after deliberation and then declared as a sentence, but unfolds as a gradual process ('Verfahren').

The third aspect of the discussion relates to help, and elicits a clear warning (illocutionary) from the chaplain: 'Du suchst zuviel fremde Hilfe' (DP 289). The question is whether K. recognises what 'wahre Hilfe' is, which in fact corresponds to the opening words of guidance uttered by the warders, about following a more introspective route to achieving understanding. K. rambles defensively about the help available from women and Court officials, but the chaplain stays silent. The text reports, significantly at this point, that the

188 'K.'s sense of guilt is existential. No crime need be named, since he feels that it is a crime for him to be alive at all.' Anthony Storr, 'Kafka's Sense of Identity' in J. P. Stern and J. J. White, eds, *Paths and Labyrinths* (London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1985), p. 12.

stormy weather outside has created 'tiefe Nacht' (DP 290). This represents K.'s lowest ebb, as he is unable to understand how suffering is ceased by extinguishing craving and attachment (The Third Noble Truth).

The fourth aspect of the discussion preparing K. for the parable is triggered by K., filling the uncomfortable gap created by the chaplain's silence with questions that miss the point of the previous teaching. K. suspects he has upset the chaplain and continues to ramble: 'Bist Du mir böse?' and 'Ich wollte Dich nicht beleidigen' (DP 290). All these interjections are 'self'-governed, fashioned by emotion, appealing to the person. Clearly, K. has learned nothing about extinguishing desires for happiness and justice, for self-ratification and self-gratification. The chaplain breaks his silence with an angry shout: 'Siehst Du denn nicht zwei Schritte weit?' (DP 290). His good intention shines through and the cause for his concern is that K. does not see 'the way', and this leads us to The Fourth Noble Truth, how to follow the right path to arrive at enlightenment. This signals the introduction of the parable.

Although K. has not understood the advice, it is important to note his reaction to the discussion. He realises that the chaplain has not delivered a 'Predigt', but he has made 'Mitteilungen' which did not show K. in a good light. As a Zen student recognises the good intentions of his master, so has K. noticed the 'gute Absicht' of the chaplain, despite the criticisms and confusions: 'es war nicht unmöglich, daß er von ihm einen entscheidenden und annehmbaren Rat bekäme, der ihm z. B. zeigen würde, nicht etwa wie der Proceß zu beeinflussen war, sondern wie man aus dem Proceß ausbrechen, wie man ihn umgehen, wie man außerhalb des Processes leben könnte' (DP 291). Somehow K. has sensed that there is a way to deal with the trial, and it is not by influencing it – that is, trying to change its course – but by stepping outside it. This is Zen for looking beyond the narrow, rational and conventional aspects of our personal lives to see the underlying reality. It is

significant that the chaplain's warning speaks of 'Schritte' because the series of tripwires that the Court has set before K. have all caused him to stumble. In this sense, K. cannot see two steps in front of himself, but focuses ten or twenty ahead, to the extent that he misses the problem under his nose – he suffers from an excess of foresight, not a lack, and the tripwire is designed to bring his attention closer to home.

The chaplain then leaves the pulpit, as if to signify that he is no longer representing the Court directly and can now speak informally, but K. again mistakes this for a personal gesture. This prompts the chaplain to reiterate his warning to K. about getting his facts wrong and creates the opportunity to recount the parable: 'In dem Gericht täuschst Du Dich' (DP 292). The perlocutionary aspect to this statement is that it refers to K., not to the Court – in other words, K.'s ignorance is not of the ways of the Court, but rather that under the Law (Dharma), selfhood is illusory.

The parable stands as a koan in its own right and illustrates K.'s misconceptions. The scripture delivers a message (illocutionary) about how different textual interpretations have emerged, but the exchange that follows has perlocutionary effects in the way that the chaplain continually wrongfoots K. by introducing new information. The effect is designed to stop K. relying on 'fremde Hilfe' and adopting 'die fremde Meinung ungeprüft', a core Buddhist teaching. The parable's simplicity and brevity has allowed many interpretations to be offered, and these variations constitute a warning about attaching to personal opinions.

Throughout the subsequent conversation, the chaplain sets tripwires to wean K. off his attachment to 'Meinungen'. For example, K.'s instant reaction to the story is to blame the doorkeeper, thereby identifying with the man. The chaplain immediately steps in to warn him of jumping to conclusions, explaining that there is no mention of deception in the parable. K. sticks to his

initial view, until the chaplain puts forward a defence of the doorkeeper, suggesting he was just doing his duty. K. rejects this logical account of the doorkeeper's role (he simply guards the door) in favour of his subjective view: 'Seine Pflicht war es vielleicht alle Fremden abzuwehren, diesen Mann aber, für den der Eingang bestimmt war, hätte er einlassen müssen' (DP 295). The chaplain warns K. not to alter the facts of the scripture and embarks on a lengthy defence of the doorkeeper, going so far as to suggest that it is the doorkeeper who is deceived. En route, he introduces a comment from an 'Erklärer' which alone is worthy of koan status: 'Richtiges Auffassen einer Sache und Mißverstehn der gleichen Sache schließen einander nicht vollständig aus' (DP 297). This is also a key Zen teaching, for it shows the limits of the intellect. The chaplain probes more deeply into the various readings of the parable, until K. can only respond: 'Du kennst die Geschichte genauer als ich und längerer Zeit' (DP 298). The silence thereafter suggests that the chaplain's perlocutions have given K. pause for thought.

Though reluctant to abandon his original thoughts, K. concedes after further discussion that it is possible for the doorkeeper to have been deceived. But just when it seems that K. is about to agree, the chaplain takes the parable into another direction ('Gegenmeinung'). The final twist in the reading places the doorkeeper in the service of the Law and hence confers on him an indubitable 'Würdigkeit'. K. cannot agree to this view because he feels that it makes the doorkeeper infallible: 'wenn man sich ihr anschließt, muß man alles was der Türhüter sagt für wahr halten' (DP 302). The chaplain's response could come from a Zen textbook: 'man muß nicht alles für wahr halten, man muß es nur für notwendig halten' (DP 303). The opposition of 'wahr' and 'notwendig' sits at the heart of Buddhism because it rejects truth in favour of reality, or cause and effect as the basis of existence. This disappoints K. who takes the rejection of truth as a victory for 'die Lüge', thereby failing to grasp

the perlocutionary message aimed at undermining his reliance on meaningful order.

The parable and its related koans have forced K. to think differently, but he is unable to step away from what he is used to: 'Er war zu müde, um alle Folgerungen der Geschichte übersehn zu können, es waren auch ungewohnte Gedankengänge, in die sie ihn führte' (DP 303). The chaplain is moved by K.'s unease ('Zartgefühl'), but must now let him go. K. feels abandoned and insists on using the condition of personal relationships as a barometer of how his life is faring: 'jetzt aber entläßt Du mich, als läge Dir nichts an mir' (DP 304).

The closing exchange of the chapter works on two levels for it presents an enigmatic picture of the Court and it draws parallels between K.'s case and the parable. Both Josef K. and the man from the country receive a personalised sermon/address, but neither makes headway in his quest. Just as the doorkeeper closes the door on the dying man, the chaplain closes the hearing by saying he wants nothing more: 'Das Gericht will nichts von Dir. Es nimmt Dich auf, wenn Du kommst, und es entläßt Dich, wenn Du gehst' (DP 304). K. is simultaneously subject to the law (unable to escape it) and outside the law (he cannot influence it). The only solution is to 'become' or 'enter' the law, but this can only be done without any baggage, by relinquishing attachment to selfhood. The Court, responsible for K.'s arrest, apparently does not make any demands on K. Usually, when an authority sanctions an arrest, it means that it intends to punish or reprimand the accused – here the Court arrests K. but leaves him at large. This is a koan to end the chapter and also to define the nature of the Court, with its authority stemming from insight, not punishment. The Court's role is to help make individuals aware of their ignorance and attachment to self – the pain and suffering of their conduct follows according to natural laws and mechanisms, such as karma.

The second aspect of the chapter ending is its correspondence with the parable. K. is the man from the country who tries all he can to gain access to the Law (insight), including ‘unofficial’ figures or ‘parasites’ operating outside the law, such as Huld, Titorelli and Leni, but fails because enlightenment cannot be bestowed. As the doorkeeper shuts the entrance, so the same happens to K. and the final chapter confirms this conclusion. Foreshadowing the closing of the parable door, K. is ushered into the meeting room at his first hearing and told: ‘Nach Ihnen muß ich schließen, es darf niemand mehr hinein’ (DP 58). The law or Dharma may concern universal and absolute truths, applicable to all, in that we all suffer, but it is also ‘empty’ in that it is not a ‘prop’ intended to support us.¹⁸⁹ Each individual case of suffering, craving and ignorance is different, because it is composed of the karma accumulated from the things each individual has said, done and thought.

3.4 Sleepwalking into suffering

*As long as we are enmeshed in our beliefs and preconceptions, we can make no progress.*¹⁹⁰

Josef K. is the classic sleepwalker: he cuts a very active and purposeful figure who clearly believes in his quest for ‘Freisprechung’, but to onlookers (within and without the text) he is living in a world of his own. He is conscious of his actions, but unaware of their consequences, as well as being ignorant of the ‘Law’. His unskillful, attachment-laden decisions attract the attentions of the Court and his stubborn grasping after ‘fremde Hilfe’ underlines his guilt.

Though we learn little about the details of K.’s life, there is enough evidence about the kind of person he is to warrant his ‘arrest’. K. displays a series of personality traits which are typical of somebody completely unaware

189 For Cixous, the law is a ‘verbal construct’ with ‘no material inside’, p. 18.

190 Khema, p. 121.

of the Dharma, the truth about how things are, the facts of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-selfhood. Impatience, violence, rage, revenge, jealousy, arrogance – all these feelings arise in Josef K. during the course of his trial. All are caused by ignorance, by not realising that everything is subject to change, that there is no immutable self to hang on to, that all things carry within themselves the seeds of dissatisfaction.

The first two adjectives that describe Josef K. on the morning of his arrest, while waiting for his breakfast, are 'gleichzeitig befremdet und hungrig' (DP 7). These two words appear like beacons to Buddhists, clear signals of suffering. Firstly, K. is 'befremdet' because his morning routine has been disturbed. The usual ordered, comfortable, familiar pattern of events has been broken and he is not happy. A crack has appeared in the edifice of K.'s carefully constructed life. It is no longer 'his' life, 'his' routine, 'his' habit, but something alien, a strange occurrence, a different event, one that does not fit. Lacking breakfast at the usual hour, K. is also hungry. Hunger appears commonly as a synonym for desire in Buddhism and is a major factor in attachment to things. So, within a few lines of having slander suggested for K.'s arrest, an alternative possibility arises much closer to home: K.'s craving or desire.

Closing the opening chapter with perfect symmetry, Josef K.'s hunger finds some satisfaction in the lips of Fräulein Bürstner. K.'s desperate sexual lunge bears all the hallmarks of a Buddhist description of craving: '[K.] faßte sie, küßte sie auf den Mund und dann über das ganze Gesicht, wie ein durstiges Tier mit der Zunge über das endlich gefundene Quellwasser hinjagt' (DP 48). K. barely notes her lack of response to his slavering advances and later goes to sleep, with a feeling of satisfaction. Significantly, however, the satisfaction is short-lived, as other concerns surface to trouble his mind. The parallels with Buddhist teaching are clear, for it is explained that even

pleasure comes wrapped up with worry of how to protect it or hang on to it. K.'s thirst is not slaked by the assault on Fräulein Bürstner, merely extended and transformed into another form of 'Sorgen', this time in the figure of Hauptmann Lanz.

K.'s ignorant ways constitute the guilt that has attracted the Court. The 'Verhaftung' announced at the beginning of the novel is reinforced by later references to 'Beziehungen' and 'Verbindungen'. It is ironic that the more K. struggles with his protests of innocence, the more 'connections' and 'attachments' he runs up. Rather than clearing his account of bad debts and cravings, he pushes his life further into the red. We have seen how a number of officials serving the court (supervisor, chaplain, information officer) attempt to disabuse him of his illusions, to no avail. He has been advised to reflect on himself, which might shatter his delusions of a solid, meaningful life, and expose its underlying tissue of transitory desires, ambitions and hopes. Instead, K.'s mind is full of external threats, influential networks and personal connections. K.'s defence of himself (of his self) consists of trying to strengthen his grip on his standing in society by calling in favours. From a Buddhist standpoint, K. simply succeeds in hardening the bonds of attachment, and puts the prospect of enlightenment further out of reach.

In contrast to the radiance and peace exuded by an enlightened being, one of the most common terms for describing Josef K. is 'Aufregung'. Twice in the opening chapter and twice when stumbling on the warders in the lumber room, K. is given over to 'Aufregung'. Similarly in the grip of overwhelming emotion, K. threatens to knock down a feeble old man who happens to be standing close to him at the end of the first hearing, an ironic closure to his speech, in which he paints himself as the small, innocent victim, bullied by a big organisation. On his way to the hearing, faced with some mean-looking kids, K. settles on a strategy for any possible future encounters: 'Wenn ich

nächstens wieder hergehen sollte [...] muß ich entweder Zuckerwerk mitnehmen, um sie zu gewinnen oder den Stock um sie zu prügeln' (DP 55). The word 'prügeln' later resurfaces in the lumber room, and 'gewinnen' describes the effect of K.'s rhetoric during his hearing, hinting at a rather cold, calculating way of treating his fellow men, with clear karmic repercussions.

Huld's servant, Leni, may not disclose much useful information regarding the nature of the Court, but she does reveal something about K. himself. She calls him 'unnachgiebig', a personality trait born of ignorance regarding impermanence. K. just will not 'let go', which is what one must do to be rid of attachment. The last word in the debate on K.'s personality goes to Josef K. himself. He admits to 'grasping' just before he is put to death. If the guilt he refused to accept is attachment-related, it is significant that the only bit of soul-searching K. does, the only admission of fault, is expressed in terms of attachment. K. admits trying to attach to the world with twenty hands and must now pay for his ignorance. Although he cannot execute himself, he willingly stops following the Fräulein Bürstner figure, as if to signal this is one attachment he has learnt to give up: 'Das Fräulein war inzwischen in eine Seitengasse eingebogen, aber K. konnte sie schon entbehren' (DP 309).

In Buddhist teaching, developing insight for ourselves is a skill which requires careful balance. We should not blindly follow what others do, nor should we reject out of hand what could be good advice. It is up to us to assess the veracity and wisdom contained in a teaching or some information, and not to worry about the status of the informer or messenger. K. fails on both counts. At various points he listens to or is led by his uncle, Advokat Huld, Leni, Kaufmann Block and Maler Titorelli, but he ignores reasonable advice from the arresting officers. Instead of investigating the worth of some information, K. assesses the quality of its packaging. He falls foul of the Buddha's advice to treat all hearsay with caution, even that which appears to

emanate from the highest, most reliable source. The only credible source is that which has been filtered through and checked by our own mental processes and experience. In contrast, K. dismisses the views of the warders as 'Dummheiten', befitting their lowly station in the social pecking order: 'Ein paar Worte, die ich mit einem mir ebenbürtigen Menschen sprechen werde, werden alles unvergleichlich klarer machen, als die längsten Reden mit diesen' (DP 15). Well-meaning, sensible advice from the supervisor is rejected for similar reasons: 'Schulmäßige Lehren bekam er hier von einem vielleicht jüngern Menschen?' (DP 23). He presumably considers the chaplain 'freundlich', because he has official recognised status.

Everything K. 'learns' comes second-hand via fellow trial-bearers or parasites of the Court. Advokat Huld and Maler Titorelli make certain telling observations about the law, but the tangle of contradictions and qualifications in their explanations never provides K. with a clear picture of the truth. K. eventually grows suspicious of Huld's methods, where personal 'Beziehungen' to court officials come into play, but not because he realises it would be wrong to seek more attachments, rather because the lawyer's contacts may be too low-ranking and unable to lend the right influence to his case. K. goes along with Huld's ploy of seeking 'Verbindungen', but he later considers Titorelli a better recruit to his 'Kreis von Helfern', on account of the higher order of officials he has access to.

Kaufmann Block is a fairly pathetic figure who has eked his own trial out over five years and enlisted the 'aid' of a battery of lawyers. K. initially considers Block 'niedrige Leute' (DP 228), but is impressed by his efforts on a variety of fronts. Block has made no progress, however, and in his tale of failed petitions, wasted efforts and misguided notions lies a cautionary tale for K. Block lets slip one pearl of wisdom when he admits: 'Jeder Fall wird für sich untersucht, es ist ja das sorgfältigste Gericht. Gemeinsam kann man also

nichts durchsetzen, nur ein einzelner erreicht manchmal etwas im Geheimen' (DP 238). Everybody has to work out the path to their own salvation: you cannot 'borrow' insight from somebody else's life.

3.5 Conclusion

*That which we call 'I' is just impermanent, ownerless karma rolling along. Don't take it personally.*¹⁹¹

Of all Kafka's works, *Der Proceß* sets the sternest test in the attempt to find positive interpretations. The novel ends in a gruesome execution, the victim's 'fault' is not specified and the presiding authority appears vindictive rather than supportive. Despite the pall hanging over Josef K.'s trial, however, there are signs pointing the way to a skillful reading: his suffering is not the result of persecution by an external force, but a natural prosecution by 'impermanent, ownerless karma', fuelled by his self-attachment.

Der Proceß represents a breakthrough for Kafka as it intertwines a straightforward narrative and plot (a man is arrested, tries to defend himself, gets executed) with a kind of counter-narrative, almost a 'sub-text', which consists of less straightforward elements that jar and purposefully do not correspond with the main flow of events. Hence, the more help K. seeks, the more serious his predicament appears; the more he learns about the Court, the less it appears to make sense; the further he probes into the Law, the further the 'Truth' appears to recede.

Der Proceß differs from the three main narratives that preceded it because the textual ambiguities in the 'Strafentrilogie' were largely located in gaps in the storyline, for example why Georg Bendemann and his father were at odds and why Gregor was turned into an insect. In *Der Proceß*, however, the ambiguities centre on the kind of world in which the action unfolds, for

191 Lama Surya Das in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/dont-take-it-personally.

example where a god, supreme authority or natural laws hold sway. From a Western perspective, the missing charge in *Der Proceß* counts as a gap because the notion of justice does not make sense without it; from a Buddhist point of view, the lack of charge is irrelevant, or even to be presumed because the 'open-arrest' model used by the Court suggests existential guilt not criminal wrongdoing.

It is standard Western practice to seek to extract 'meaning' from a work, hence it is not surprising that K.'s death invites negative thoughts of defeat and punishment, whereas Buddhist thinking sees it as entirely natural.¹⁹² For Erich Heller, *Der Proceß* 'confronts the reader and interpreter not so much with difficulties as with inescapable defeat', and he concludes that there can be no other novel 'so thoroughly pervaded by the sense of nightmare and paranoia as *The Trial*'.¹⁹³ For Heller, the heart of the problem was that Kafka insisted on 'the ultimately incompatible, the goodness of the Law and the evil of its application'.¹⁹⁴ An unfortunate outcome is inevitable as soon as dualistic concepts such as good and evil take root. The principal cause of negativity is the separation of the law into good nature and bad application.

Walter Sokel takes up a position which is possibly as far from Buddhism as can be in stating that death is akin to redemption for Kafka.¹⁹⁵ Sokel compares entering the Law with self-preservation, hence K.'s struggles with the Court, and his inability to comprehend the charge and circumstances of his arrest must result in self-destruction. From a Buddhist perspective, entry into the Law would not mean acquiescence to punishment or submission to a superior order, but recognition that the self is not the highest or purest form

192 'Death is irrational', from Solomon J. Spiro's 'Verdict – Guilty! A Study of *The Trial*' in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol 17, No. 3. (Jul 1971), p. 178.

193 Erich Heller, 'Man Guilty' in James Rolleston, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Trial* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1976), p. 98.

194 Ibid., p. 98.

195 Sokel, 'The Three Endings of Josef K.', p. 338.

of personal expression: it represents a highly volatile contingency and this impermanence needs to be respected.

Like Sokel, Eschweiler finds redemption in the novel, especially once his revised edition turns the cathedral scene into a 'Drehpunkt' and restores Josef K.'s dream. Eschweiler considers 'Der Dom' the 'Achsenkapitel' because K.'s behaviour after the parable is marked 'weniger durch Verständnislosigkeit und Auflehnung als vielmehr durch Einsichten und demgemäßes Handeln'.¹⁹⁶ Josef K. consequently embarks on a series of actions which Eschweiler describes as 'Aspekte der Hoffnung' (dismissing Huld, learning about art, deciding to visit his mother). From a Buddhist viewpoint, however, the sermon is best placed at the end of the novel for it flags up K.'s reluctance to examine his guilt and his reliance on external support: the chaplain's exasperation suggests that the end is nigh unless K. can find insight quickly.

For Eschweiler, Kafka's art depicts 'einen überzeugenden sinnerfüllten Kosmos', and his revised form of *Der Proceß* demonstrates this, with Josef K.'s dreamed death a key moment.¹⁹⁷ The painful blows of arrest, trial and execution are re-cast into transformative stepping stones towards redemption: death may be inevitable but Josef K. can claim victory by going willingly to his final resting place. Jens Kruse agrees with the inclusion of 'Ein Traum' because it supplies the 'necessary elements of hope that are part of the fabric of the novel'.¹⁹⁸ Josef K.'s dream represents 'the fulfilment of his unfulfillable wishes' by making available what was otherwise out of reach: 'resolution, understanding, insight, affirmation of identity'.¹⁹⁹

196 Eschweiler, *Der verborgene Hintergrund*, p. 30.

197 Eschweiler, *Kosmos*, p. 51.

198 Jens Kruse, 'Kafka's "Ein Traum" and the "Ende" Chapter of *Der Proceß*' in *German Studies Review*, Vol 26, No. 2 (May 2003), p. 262.

199 Ibid., p. 270.

In a Buddhist sense, however, this wish-fulfilment is not a 'skillful' reading because the death-espousing 'Verwandlung' masks an act of desperation, devoid of insight and compromised by attachment to self. Josef K.'s leap into his grave recalls his earlier 'thirsty lunge' at Fräulein Bürstner ('wie ein Hungriger die Nahrung') and foreshadows the hunger artist's inexorable slide into starvation, clinging to a veneer of selfhood to hide the hollow principles beneath. Josef K.'s descent towards an ignominious execution contrasts strongly with K.'s unburdened emergence from the meeting with Bürgel, which stands as a more convincing moment of 'transformation'.

Although *Der Proceß* deals with death, it does not need to be dark. While a Buddhist would find Josef K. guilty (of attachment to self), this does not mean his fate is sealed (as his uncle suggests). The guilt which attracts the Court is a living, organic phenomenon which does not 'scar' the individual for life, but 'colours' his present status. Change is possible, but it must come through understanding, an enlightened outlook, and Josef K. fails all the Court's (perlocutionary) attempts to jolt him into this realisation. Robertson states that Josef K.'s guilt results from 'being the person he is', which is open to negative interpretation if it is read as an evaluation of his character because it is not clear what specifically is wrong. However, if the guilt is seen as an indication of his insight, as if the Court's assessment is tantamount to taking his 'spiritual' temperature, then Josef K. is driven by attachment to selfhood, and his feverish attempts to 'buffer' his self only serve to aggravate his condition. The surfeit of negative karma means he is outlived by his ignorance: *es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben*' (DP 312).

Der Proceß has captivated many readers with the questions it raises and apparently declines to answer. Gaps and inconsistencies depress the spirit in a (Judaean-Christian) world where truth and justice are expected to prevail, but

they ring true in a (Buddhist) world where impermanence and emptiness reign. For example, the lack of charge cited for K.'s arrest hints at an abuse of justice or an illogical set of laws – both nightmarish consequences.

Alternatively, the lack of charge can be disregarded as insignificant, because the non-custodial arrest points to wrong view, rather than a specific act: the nightmare here is not that there is a problem with the world, justice or authority, but with the individual who has fallen out of line with it. A Buddhist reader might see that the strings of selfhood are responsible for the discord and it is thus ourselves who can reharmonise.

The marriage of illocutionary and perlocutionary devices in the text has a significant influence on the structure of the work. The infusion of koan-styled elements into the narrative interrupts the linear flow of the story, such that it is possible to establish only a rudimentary plot and timeline. K.'s thirtieth and thirty-first birthdays add a frame to the action, but the year's events are not easy to pinpoint. From a rational perspective, this can be viewed as 'missing' information and need not overly influence the interpretation of the text, but the passage of time is often used as a measure of progress. Franz Kuna called *Der Proceß* 'one of the most labyrinthine books in the history of literature, a book not only pregnant with dire complexities but full of dead ends, contradictions and paths continuously doubling back on themselves'.²⁰⁰ This is not intended as praise but marks a potential barrier to understanding. If we do not have all the facts and figures to hand, how can we evaluate whether K.'s arrest is warranted or not?

In the years following *Der Proceß*, Kafka's failing health presented him with the opportunity to avoid familial and romantic commitments that may have perturbed him and from this open ground sprang the Zürau aphorisms,

200 Franz Kuna, *Kafka: Literature as Corrective Punishment* (London: Paul Elek, 1974), p. 111.

a collection of expressions which build on the link between suffering and craving (*Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung*), by exploring ways to address the problem (*der wahre Weg*). There would be a significant gap before Kafka's next novelistic enterprise, *Das Schloß*, which displays further attunement to Buddhist thinking in its account of K., the ignorant sleepwalker who wakes up from his traumatic reveries.

Chapter 4 The Zürau Aphorisms

4.1 Introduction

*'All this Zen stuff is nonsense,' said the sceptic. 'You are perfectly correct,' responded the master, 'but this is a teaching I normally reserve for my most advanced students.'*²⁰¹

The third chapter shows how *Der Proceß* represents a breakthrough in that Kafka moved beyond the depiction of unexplained suffering which marked his earlier works, and started to focus on how the individual is to a significant degree himself responsible for his suffering. This chapter explores the next period in Kafka's writing, characterised by a shift in philosophical expression, as well as form, and exemplified by the aphorisms written during his stay in Zürau, also known under the title coined by Max Brod, *Betrachtungen über Sünde, Leid, Hoffnung und den wahren Weg*.

Kafka withdrew to Zürau to recuperate after his health deteriorated and it can be speculated that the changes in Kafka's circumstances caused a certain amount of reflection about the path his life might take. Gabriel Josipovici contends that they form 'Kafka's most sustained meditation on life and death, good and evil, and the role of art in human life'.²⁰² For Robertson, they are 'central to Kafka's work'²⁰³ and in these thoughts he 'ponders the last things of religion in order to establish the principles on which the new community of the future must be founded'.²⁰⁴

The *Betrachtungen* are not typically aphoristic in that they do not uniformly provide short, pithy statements expressing a general truth, but vary in content and form. Some tackle traditional subjects like Original Sin, and

201 Timothy Freke in Titmuss, p. 21.

202 Gabriel Josipovici, *The Singer on the Shore* (Carcanet Press: Manchester, 2006), p. 179.

203 Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism*, p. 187.

204 Ibid., p. 189.

others experiment with unusual imagery, such as the personification of question and answer; some are brief and to the point and deliver an unequivocal message (illocutionary style), while others filter their reflections through retractions and qualifications to leave an uncertain message (perlocutionary style). These enigmatic messages are not the result of muddled thinking, but deliberate constructions, much like the koans and mondos used by Zen masters to jolt students out of ingrained habits and assumptions.²⁰⁵ Zen is particularly drawn to paradox because the interruption of reason provides the 'lightning flash' which illuminates the mind to the reality of emptiness, and this technique would give a more positive interpretation to similar constructions in Kafka's work.

Robertson detects in the aphorisms the expression of a 'spiritual crisis', and this 'self-estrangement' could be a step towards non-attachment to self.²⁰⁶ According to Richard Gray, Kafka found in aphoristic discourse a method of 'coming to terms with the self in textual form' as it offers the opportunity 'to produce a "constructive destruction" of the self, i.e. a dismantling and reconstruction of the self accomplished through a specific textual medium'.²⁰⁷ This still sits within the compass of many Western traditions, as the self re-emerges in a new project. In contrast, a Zen approach would dismantle the self but keep it in unreconstructed form, in a fluid aggregate of elements, to avoid the arising of attachments and dependencies.

This investigation into the Zürau aphorisms follows the methodology outlined earlier: first, texts will be examined at a conceptual level, to determine

205 Not all Buddhist aphorisms are paradoxical. *The Dhammapada*, a collection of thoughts illustrating the Dharma, offer unequivocal teachings, such as: '42. An enemy can hurt an enemy, and a man who hates can harm another man; but a man's own mind, if wrongly directed, can do him a far greater harm'. *The Dhammapada*, translated by Juan Mascaro (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 41.

206 Ritchie Robertson, 'Kafka as Anti-Christian: *Das Urteil*, *Die Verwandlung*, and the Aphorisms' in James Rolleston, ed., *A Companion to the Works of Franz Kafka* (New York: Camden House, 2003), p. 109.

207 Richard Gray, pp. 19-20.

how closely the content and themes reflect Buddhist thinking (illocutionary approach); second, texts will be considered in terms of the response they are designed to elicit in the reader (perlocutionary approach).

4.2 Illocutionary messages

*Life seems to be a perpetual struggle, some enormous effort against staggering odds. And what is our solution to all this dissatisfaction? We get stuck in the 'if only' syndrome.*²⁰⁸

Kafka's aphorisms cannot all be seen as devices to cause bafflement, and in many instances it is fruitful to treat them as illocutionary and explore the content as an indication of certain preoccupations Kafka had. This is not to say that the *Betrachtungen* can be read as conventional aphorisms with 'truth-defining' qualities, because the texts are vehicles for literary expressions, rather than philosophical beliefs. As such, the aphorism helps Kafka to explore the maelstrom of hopes, fears and desires that crystallise into the idea we have of ourselves. Richard Gray suggests a similar process when he describes an aphorism by Kafka as 'a *literary* text depicting the tension, so typical of Kafka's works, between a theoretically recognised possibility and the simultaneous denial of its concrete realisability' (author's italics).²⁰⁹ This relieves the texts of any didactic quest to capture 'truth', and the ideas explored can be taken as ways to explore the question of selfhood.

Viewed within a Buddhist framework, the mystery of the self relates to its underlying emptiness, not an ethereal essence. While a Christian reader, for example, searches for an essential, unique soul buried under the perishable features of our earthly lives, a Buddhist reader searches conversely for the nameless transitoriness that lies hidden below the decaying labels used to

208 Henepola Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), p. 9.

209 Richard Gray, p. 8.

define personality. To reflect this correspondence with a Buddhist understanding of selfhood, a selection of aphorisms follows, grouped around themes related to The Four Noble Truths. It is not the case that all the aphorisms 'fit' Buddhist readings, but a significant proportion display clear pointers to these key notions:

- considerations of suffering (The First Noble Truth)
- consequences of attachment (The Second Noble Truth)
- withdrawal from attachment (The Third Noble Truth)
- the path (The Fourth Noble Truth).

The First Noble Truth

This selection shares connections with the basic tenets of Buddhist thought, such as suffering, emptiness as the underlying truth, and ignorance as a major obstacle to enlightenment. One route to a skillful reading of Kafka lies in finding links with the Buddhist account of the self (as non-existent in the absolute sense); from this perspective much of Kafka's work can be seen as a critique of the stubborn practice of striving after selfhood, a key difference between Buddhist and Western thought.

The First Noble Truth declares the inevitability of suffering and attributes it to a fault in human perception of the world (human beings are guilty of misunderstanding the nature of things), rather than a fault in the way the world operates (human beings are affected as innocent bystanders). Kafka's thinking in the aphorisms reveals some correlation with this view that most human suffering is self-inflicted, occasioned by clinging to selfhood: the pain resides in the personal connection.

Aphorism 24

Das Glück begreifen, daß der Boden, auf dem Du stehst, nicht größer sein kann, als die zwei Füße ihn bedecken. (NSF2 118)²¹⁰

In this aphorism the statement is brief and bold, and may demand some reflection on the part of the reader, but the intention is not to dazzle or confuse. There is a hint of paradox, in that the introduction of ‘good fortune’ at the beginning suggests something positive will follow, but the news that we can only occupy by nature a small plot of land (the area that we stand on) may come as an initial disappointment before the sense of the message is understood.

The spatial limitation initially seems rather sad and meagre, but the lack of territory can also be seen as liberating. With less ground to be attached to, and fewer objects for the self to latch onto, there should be fewer obstacles and hindrances on the path to enlightenment or salvation. We can own great tracts of land but the ground on which our feet are planted is always the same size. The sense of this message was not grasped by Josef K., as he was always trying to extend the ground on which he stood, but K. fared better in *Das Schloß*, as he eventually let go of his designs on the Castle and refocused on his role in the village.

Aphorism 27

Das Negative zu tun, ist uns noch auferlegt, das Positive ist uns schon gegeben. (NSF2 119)

This brief two-part aphorism is general enough to allow a variety of interpretations. A Christian view would find tension in the opposition of positive and negative, with the positive in us attributable to God, for those in

²¹⁰ Kafka's numbered aphorisms are taken from *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente* (Vol. 2), ed. Jost Schillemeit (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1992), pp. 113-140. References will be shown as NSF2 and the page number.

touch with their faith. As Josef K. suggests when he does not like being referred to as one of the guilty, the negative is a consequence of Original Sin that human beings cannot avoid.

Viewed from a Buddhist position, the positive within us would refer to our 'Buddha nature', or the innate potential within all human beings to realise an enlightened state. Carrying out the negative is what we must do to unearth the Dharma within from beneath the layers of self-motivated actions that obscure the way to enlightenment. The instruction in this aphorism runs counter to the actions of the 'buffered self' with the aim of dismantling rather than reinforcing the divisions which separate the individual from the world. Josef K. tries to prove his innocence (lack of wrongdoing), but in fact his innocence (innate Buddha nature) is 'given' and he needs to strip away the layers of self-ishness (guilt) to reveal it.

Aphorism 50

Der Mensch kann nicht leben ohne ein dauerndes Vertrauen zu etwas Unzerstörbarem in sich, wobei sowohl das Unzerstörbare als auch das Vertrauen ihm dauernd verborgen bleiben können. Eine der Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten dieses Verborgenen-Bleibens ist der Glaube an einen persönlichen Gott. (NSF2 124)

This aphorism has found its way into many texts about Kafka's work because of its references to 'etwas Unzerstörbares', 'Glaube' and 'Gott'. These terms are Judaeo-Christian touchstones which define the way we see ourselves. It is difficult to resist a negative interpretation once the desired indestructible core remains hidden and is substituted with a belief in God. This suggests that man 'kann nicht leben' without belief and this is not solid ground on which to base existence. Taken as a whole, the reflection suggests that a man needs his faith, but that he may never be able to uncover it. This reading would therefore appear to correspond to the sense of abandonment experienced by

all the major figures in Kafka's work, from Gregor Samsa to Josef K., and would strike a chord with anybody who is looking for evidence of existential angst in Kafka's writing: God is in hiding from us.

However, the Buddhist evaluation of this reflection avoids the emotive absolutes and targets the word 'persönlich', for it is from here that suffering and angst spring. This produces a different result, in that the feeling of 'loss' or 'concealment' is attributable to the individual, instead of to an unwanted, undeserved situation imposed from without. That which is indestructible, from a Buddhist viewpoint, is not a self or soul or anything personalised, but can be understood to be the Dharma or Buddha nature. If it is concealed, it is not through an uncaring or punitive creator, it is because we have obscured it (inadvertently or not) by inscribing our name on it. The personal god referred to is the one we pray to in order that our wishes, our desires and our fears are heard, the one we look to for our protection. The consequences of this are far-ranging, for if the 'fault' is within us, then it can presumably be fixed from within. If the fault lies externally in some unknown place, it is difficult to fix.

Aphorism 62

Die Tatsache, daß es nichts anderes gibt als eine geistige Welt, nimmt uns die Hoffnung und gibt uns die Gewißheit. (NSF2 127)

This aphorism contains a stark message in a novel twist, as it trades off 'Hoffnung' and 'Gewißheit'. Ordinarily, the certainty of something would be more attractive than the mere prospect of it, but the context is the fact that the world we live in is nothing but a 'geistige Welt'. We must pay for this certainty with the loss of the physical aspect of the world, and hence we stand to lose much of the substance which defines our identity. The aphorism bears comparison with the disappointed conclusion Josef K. draws from his discussion with the chaplain. K. has been shaken by the difficulty in extracting any kind of reliable meaning from the parable *Vor dem Gesetz*

because he is told to accept the doorkeeper's words as 'notwendig' rather than 'wahr'. K. declares that 'die Lüge' represents the order of the world, as he is unable to give up the hope of meaningfulness in exchange for the reality of emptiness, a harsh lesson that Buddhists will be familiar with.

Aphorism 66

Er ist ein freier und gesicherter Bürger der Erde, denn er ist an eine Kette gelegt, die lang genug ist, um ihm alle irdischen Räume frei zu geben und doch nur so lang, daß nichts ihn über die Grenzen der Erde reißen kann. Gleichzeitig aber ist er auch ein freier und gesicherter Bürger des Himmels, denn er ist auch an eine ähnlich berechnete Himmelskette gelegt. Will er nun auf die Erde drosselt ihn das Halsband des Himmels, will er in den Himmel jenes der Erde. Und trotzdem hat er alle Möglichkeiten und fühlt es, ja er weigert sich sogar das Ganze auf einen Fehler bei der ersten Fesselung zurückzuführen. (NSF2 127-128)

Metaphorical chains can be found throughout Kafka's work, from Josef K.'s (assumed) innocence to K.'s (unofficial) land surveyor status. Josef K. is enslaved by his pursuit of justice, while the Court informs him he is actually free to continue his life. K. demands recognition, though the Castle is happy to allow him to stay in the village anyway. Suffering in each case is down to the need to be 'gesichert' to solid ground. Freedom of movement is something that can easily be achieved and its lack keenly perceived. But freedom from security is not sought after.

This aphorism gives an accurate account of the nature of ignorance and attachment, and an explanation of why at times we appear to be comfortable with life-as-suffering. The opening line is a classic paradoxical gambit in that we are introduced first to a citizen who is 'frei' and 'gesichert', but also enchained. This chain offers security, by keeping him away from areas of danger, and freedom, by giving him a long enough leash to not feel the strain of the metal. There are actually two chains, earthly and heavenly, so he forms part of a tug-of-war between the two poles.

This citizen chooses to ponder all the possibilities open to him, but refuses to acknowledge the mistake on which the entire enchainment has been built. This mistake can be understood as attachment to some kind of certainty that will underpin our existence. Herbert Tauber sees the text as an expression of belonging to two spheres of existence ‘opposed to each other in continual struggle’, and suffering results from this frustration because ‘the ego can identify itself with neither’.²¹¹ The Buddhist approach would transcend the tension of not-fitting by recognising the underlying emptiness of both spheres.

Readers with a Western outlook would see the chains and the exclusions, and struggle to find an arrangement which satisfies ‘alle Möglichkeiten’. Richard Gray notes the paradox of chains and freedom, and concludes that the possibilities of freedom cannot be realised: ‘The situation Kafka describes here [...] denies humankind’s capacity to transform reflection on the possible into concrete enactment in life: the split between abstract knowledge and the practical realm of lived experience is absolute.’²¹² For a Buddhist, the chains present a problem, but in a different way. It is not so much the ‘human’ end of the chain that causes the suffering (the end linked to the citizen), but the other end linked to solid ground. It is the attachment to being ‘gesichert’ that causes trouble, but the Western mindset is such that it needs an ‘open chain’ – secured at one end, but with an infinitely long tether to allow total liberty of movement.

Aphorism 82

Warum klagen wir wegen des Sündenfalls? Nicht seinetwegen sind wir aus dem Paradiese vertrieben worden, sondern wegen des Baumes des Lebens, damit wir nicht von ihm essen. (NSF2 131)

211 Herbert Tauber, *Franz Kafka: An Interpretation of his Works* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1948), p. 217.

212 Richard Gray, p. 146.

Aphorism 82 concerns the question of Original Sin and offers a clear, unequivocal reworking of the traditional idea, albeit from an unorthodox angle. The reflection fine-tunes the story of the Fall and suggests that the reason for the expulsion from paradise was to keep people from eating of the tree of life. This version suggests that we should not attribute the suffering in our lives to the effects of Original Sin (disobeying an external law), but rather to our lust for life. In other words, suffering issues from our own actions, not from a distant authority that relieves us of some of the blame.

Aphorism 83

Wir sind nicht nur deshalb sündig, weil wir vom Baum der Erkenntnis gegessen haben, sondern auch deshalb, weil wir vom Baum des Lebens noch nicht gegessen haben. Sündig ist der Stand, in dem wir uns befinden, unabhängig von Schuld. (NSF2 131)

The discussion on sin continues in aphorism 83 with the assertion that sin is nothing to do with right or wrong, guilt or innocence. It is not a transgression against a particular set of rules or codes, but it is rather a perception or attitude.

A Christian reading would baulk at the idea of being sinful regardless of guilt, a situation which evokes the fate of Josef K. and offends against the human sense of justice. Richard Gray takes a similarly negative line for he understands sin as conceived by Kafka to mean ‘the oppositional space between two inimical absolutes, pure knowledge and pure life’.²¹³ We are torn between these two poles, condemned to suffering. The Buddhist reader, however, would not associate sin with a particular event, but see it as the reality of conditioned existence to which all things are subject, and appreciate that the ‘antidote’ to sin is a dose of insight into emptiness. The aphorism points out the consequences of pursuing knowledge without living life, which

²¹³ Richard Gray, p. 145.

would approximate to the Buddhist view that knowing alone cannot lead to understanding.

Aphorism 102

Alle Leiden um uns müssen auch wir leiden. Wir alle haben nicht einen Leib aber ein Wachstum und das führt uns durch alle Schmerzen, ob in dieser oder jener Form. So wie das Kind durch alle Lebensstadien bis zum Greis und zum Tod sich entwickelt (und jedes Stadium im Grunde dem früheren, im Verlangen oder in Furcht, unerreichbar scheint) ebenso entwickeln wir uns (nicht weniger tief mit der Menschheit verbunden als mit uns selbst) durch alle Leiden dieser Welt. Für Gerechtigkeit ist in diesem Zusammenhang kein Platz, aber auch nicht für Furcht vor den Leiden oder für die Auslegung des Leidens als eines Verdienstes. (NSF2 137)

This aphorism reads like a Buddhist manifesto, incorporating all the key concepts of suffering, impermanence and not-self. First, it speaks of change and the passage of time, things which recall the notion of impermanence and evoke the idea of samsara, describing the inevitability of suffering in a general cyclical sense as we grow from childhood through adulthood to inevitable death. Second, it underlines the notion of not-self, as it prefers to talk of 'Wachstum' rather than 'Leib', hence stressing the fact that our bodies are in constant development. Finally, it hints at the characteristic of not-self in its denial of justice in the world. The concept of justice is dependent on the world being meaningful, requiring fixed, constant values for what is good and bad, resting on an established framework of rules. Given the notions of impermanence and not-self, the idea of worldly justice must be illusory, because it presupposes the idea of the person. This is what trips up Josef K. in *Der Proceß*, but later in *Das Schloß* K. realises that personalised 'Gerechtigkeit' is a fantasy, hence his 'victorious' withdrawal.

In addition to these thoughts, this aphorism also opens with a comment that evokes Buddhist teaching on karma. It is central to Buddhist philosophy that the suffering we undergo be seen as caused from within by the self's

attachments and desires, and not blamed on external factors. The last line of the aphorism shuts off the route via which suffering can be justified as a meaningful experience, by elevating the endurance of pain and hardship into something worthy of merit or admiration.

Aphorism 109

‘Daß es uns an Glauben fehle, kann man nicht sagen. Allein die einfache Tatsache unseres Lebens ist in ihrem Glaubenswert gar nicht auszuschöpfen.’

‘Hier wäre ein Glaubenswert? Man kann doch nicht nicht-leben.’

‘Eben in diesem “kann doch nicht” steckt die wahnsinnige Kraft des Glaubens; in dieser Verneinung bekommt sie Gestalt.’

Es ist nicht notwendig, daß Du aus dem Haus gehst. Bleib bei Deinem Tisch und horche. Horche nicht einmal, warte nur. Warte nicht einmal, sei völlig still und allein. Anbieten wird sich Dir die Welt zur Entlarvung, sie kann nicht anders, verückt wird sie sich vor Dir winden. (NSF2 139-140)

This aphorism comes in two parts, the first of which displays a mondo-style exchange on the subject of belief. The initial speaker makes a positive declaration about human faith, which is underlined by the very fact of our being alive. The response suggests there is nothing special in just ‘living’, which is the bare minimum we can do. But the initial speaker explains that the force of belief can be witnessed in this basic urge to resist ‘nicht-leben’. It is possible to interpret the aphorism in an existentialist way, as the human will shines through as the dynamic life force. A Buddhist view would be wary of the ‘crazy’ power of belief because it assumes ‘Gestalt’ and hence the risk of attachment is palpable. This is a good representation of the tightrope we walk, balancing the need for self-preservation with the desire to have meaning.

The second part uses the familiar qualification by degrees formula which can often be seen in Kafka’s narrative fiction. The reader is urged to stay at home, listen and wait, though to and for what are not specified. Then the advice is revised to exclude listening, then exclude waiting, until all that

remains is to keep still. This reads like tips for practising meditation, where the aim is to remove step by step any traces of selfhood from consciousness by laying bare its volitions. Described as 'verzückt', whether in agony or ecstasy, this 'unmasked' world reveals the truth of suffering. The exhortation not to do anything in order to get something is typically Zen-like. It follows in the best traditions of paradoxes such as, 'the harder you look, the less you see'. This expression finds its way into *Der Proceß*, as the warders counsel introspection or contemplation, but Josef K. prefers action, 'mit zwanzig Händen'.

The Second Noble Truth

The following aphorisms address the cause of suffering, which can variously be rendered as desire, thirst, attachment or craving (*tanha*). It is the cause of grief because our wants defy the characteristic impermanence of the world as we try to stake claims, establish solid ground, possess or absorb something within the self. Understanding this is of crucial importance to Buddhism, and the texts below suggest this consideration did not escape Kafka's attention.

Aphorism 2

Alle menschlichen Fehler sind Ungeduld, ein vorzeitiges Abbrechen des Methodischen, ein scheinbares Empfinden der scheinbaren Sache. (NSF2 113)

This aphorism talks about impatience, rather than attachment, but the cause of the impatience is the desire to possess now ('Empfinden'). This simple, general statement sets up impatience as an underlying feature of human nature, an innate fault which leads inevitably to error and suffering. The problem with impatience is the inability to move with the flow of time, to accept impermanence and the process of change. It is common for Buddhists to recommend living *in* the moment (rather than *for* the moment, which implies a focus on meaningfulness) and not to dream away one's life speculating on the future or agonising over the past. Impatience arises when

we want the future to become the present, and interrupt what we are doing to accelerate the arrival of the desired object.

We are not content with the object of our desire being ‘imagined’ or ‘remembered’, but we crave something concrete or visible, a physical relationship with something: we therefore ‘pin down’ the nearest ostensible object and attach ourselves to it. In doing so, we ruin the present by not living ‘in’ it, where we acknowledge that it is a moment in time and ride along with it; instead we live ‘for’ it, where we drop anchor and expect that the present is always here, not going anywhere and not subject to change.

Aphorism 3

Es gibt zwei menschliche Hauptsünden, aus welchen sich alle andern ableiten: Ungeduld und Lässigkeit. Wegen der Ungeduld sind sie aus dem Paradiese vertrieben worden, wegen der Lässigkeit kehren sie nicht zurück. Vielleicht aber gibt es nur eine Hauptsünde: die Ungeduld. Wegen der Ungeduld sind sie vertrieben worden, wegen der Ungeduld kehren sie nicht zurück. (NSF2 113)

Aphorism 3 continues the theme of impatience, but this time with much greater conviction, as it is elevated to the status of ‘Hauptsünde’. Kafka’s predilection for assertion and retraction is again in evidence as the initial reflection confidently names ‘Ungeduld’ and ‘Lässigkeit’ as the two principal vices, only to retract the latter and leave impatience as the reason for man’s eviction from paradise and continued exclusion.

From a Buddhist point of view this makes sense, as impatience carries greater karmic baggage, derived from slavish obedience to what the self craves and a lack of understanding of the impermanent nature of all things. The antidote to impatience, and one which works with many human failings, is mindfulness. Developing this quality by living fully in the moment stills the flow of wants and desires, which drag the self out of the present into the future.

Aphorism 13

Ein erstes Zeichen beginnender Erkenntnis ist der Wunsch zu sterben. Dieses Leben scheint unerträglich, ein anderes unerreichbar. Man schämt sich nicht mehr, sterben zu wollen; man bittet aus der alten Zelle, die man haßt, in eine neue gebracht zu werden, die man erst hassen lernen wird. Ein Rest von Glauben wirkt dabei mit, während des Transportes werde zufällig der Herr durch den Gang kommen, den Gefangenen ansehen und sagen: 'Diesen sollt Ihr nicht wieder einsperren. Er kommt zu mir.' (NSF2 116)

This aphorism starts negatively as the positive allure of dawning understanding is offset by 'der Wunsch zu sterben'. This death wish is a natural consequence of repeated disappointments, moving through life from one hated 'Zelle' to another, understandable given the prison setting. The scene darkens further when faith is introduced, as the vestige of hope is fed by a chance meeting with the governor, who has the power to issue an unlikely reprieve. There are Christian overtones in the reference to 'Herr', as salvation rests on the 'Lord' to release the prisoner from his cycle of incarcerations.

The aphorism's negativity comes from the puzzle of 'Erkenntnis' being impossible in this life and unattainable in any other. The 'Transport' to a better place with the Lord is 'zufällig'. A Buddhist view would be more positive, but would entail reading 'against the grain': the dawn of enlightenment comes with death of the self (or its illusory absolute form). The problem to overcome is why the individual is a 'Gefangener': Josef K. would stumble at this hurdle, but a Buddhist might recognise the individual's imprisonment in selfhood: relying on external help (from the Lord, or 'fremde Hilfe') is unskillful.

Aphorism 76

Dieses Gefühl: 'hier ankere ich nicht' und gleich die wogende tragende Flut um sich fühlen.

Ein Umschwung. Lauernd, ängstlich, hoffend umschleicht die Antwort die Frage, sucht verzweifelt in ihrem unzugänglichen Gesicht, folgt ihr auf den sinnlosesten d. h. von der Antwort möglichst wegstrebenden Wegen. (NSF2 129-130)

This aphorism expresses a clear statement on non-attachment, and hence aligns with the other reflections relating to suffering associated with possession. By not wanting to 'drop anchor' the individual is rejecting the need for a secure mooring. The sea-swell represents the world of impermanence, and its movement can induce a sense of nausea, as well as a sense of freedom. Human instinct, driven by self-preservation, seeks a secure mooring when floating on the sea of impermanence. Anchoring would result in reduced manoeuvrability and more chance of coming to harm; the more enlightened option would be to learn how to float freely on the swell, to rise and fall on the waves and thereby remain close to the surface. This is not an easy task, but the main challenge lies in taming the fear and panic within the self, rather than navigating the waves.

The second part of the aphorism investigates a related theme, and one close to Zen Buddhism, which sees answer and question come to life in an uncomfortable relationship where they seem unable to communicate properly: this suggests how we fail to see an answer right under our nose and instead look in vain in more remote places. An idiom in English tells us that the answer is staring us in the face, and Kafka brings this to life with a twist as the Answer looks the Question directly in the face, but is not acknowledged. In other words, the answer to our question is sometimes very simple, but we choose to look for complicated solutions that are 'sinnlos' and 'wegstrebend'. We are told that Question averts its gaze, and this lends a sinister undertone to the thought, suggesting that the Answer has been deliberately ignored, hence its 'Verzweiflung'.

The interplay between question and answer calls to mind the Zen mondo as a method of tackling the conundrum 'What is the true self?': 'It is a way of extracting an answer from within the mind of the questioner himself, because

the answer lies potentially in the question.’²¹⁴ Buddhism does not seek to give answers, but asks us to look for the answers from within the depths of our own beings, not by reasoning but by going beyond reasoning, into an intuitive meditation.

Aphorism 86

Seit dem Sündenfall sind wir in der Fähigkeit zur Erkenntnis des Guten und Bösen im Wesentlichen gleich; trotzdem suchen wir gerade hier unsere besonderen Vorzüge. Aber erst jenseits dieser Erkenntnis beginnen die wahren Verschiedenheiten. Der gegenteilige Schein wird durch Folgendes hervorgerufen: Niemand kann sich mit der Erkenntnis allein begnügen, sondern muß sich bestreben, ihr gemäß zu handeln. Dazu aber ist ihm die Kraft nicht mitgegeben, er muß daher sich zerstören, selbst auf die Gefahr hin, sogar dadurch die notwendige Kraft nicht zu erhalten, aber es bleibt ihm nichts anderes übrig als dieser letzte Versuch. (Das ist auch der Sinn der Todesdrohung beim Verbot des Essens vom Baume der Erkenntnis; vielleicht ist das auch der ursprüngliche Sinn des natürlichen Todes.) Vor diesem Versuch nun fürchtet er sich; lieber will er die Erkenntnis des Guten und Bösen rückgängig machen; (die Bezeichnung: ‘Sündenfall’ geht auf diese Angst zurück) aber das Geschehene kann nicht rückgängig gemacht, sondern nur getrübt werden. Zu diesem Zweck entstehen die Motivationen. Die ganze Welt ist ihrer voll, ja die ganze sichtbare Welt ist vielleicht nichts anderes, als eine Motivation des einen Augenblick lang ruhenwollenden Menschen. Ein Versuch, die Tatsache der Erkenntnis zu fälschen, die Erkenntnis erst zum Ziel zu machen. (NSF2 132-133)

The longest aphorism is an alternative reading of the biblical ‘Fall’, which contains some unusual and complicated ideas, but they are not shocking, irrational or nonsensical. It explores the links between knowledge, understanding and motivation and belongs in the group of reflections on the theme of attachment, because it concludes that the individual’s powerful urge towards self-preservation is the force behind Original Sin.

²¹⁴ Julia Ching quotes D. T. Suzuki on monads in ‘Paradigms of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity’ in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol 4 (1984), p. 48.

Eating of the Tree of Knowledge represents the birth of the ego, the split of the lesser 'personal' self from the all-encompassing universal Self. By trying to build up knowledge, facts, information, the self causes an ever deeper split – a sharp duality – with the rest of Nature. The effort of pooling this accumulated knowledge and converting it into an overall understanding of the world is too demanding, because it must necessarily result in a destruction of the self, as it merges again with the Self. Just as the Question avoids the Answer, it is human instinct to avoid that which poses a threat to the self. So rather than accept the answer and agree to self-denial, the human response is to cover up the tracks which show how Original Sin can be traced back to the self and its thirst for knowledge.

A smokescreen is created by 'Motivationen', which are attempts to make of knowledge an end in itself. This is the self creating a protective barrier around itself. The equivalent of motivation in Buddhist thought would be volition, or expressions of the will. This is how the self communicates its desires and perpetuates its existence. The result of the motivation may be successful or not, achieved or not, fulfilled or not, but for the purposes of the self the mere birth of a motivation is sufficient to create an extra layer of protection. This is because – in Buddhist terms – all of our volitions come charged with karmic weight, whenever they are issued from the self.

So, in this sense, Original Sin is to be understood as a sin because the first bite of the apple was the first act of the newborn self. The use of the word 'sin' may be misleading because from a Western viewpoint it carries with it the connotation of wrongdoing, of straying from a set path and therefore subject to punishment: there has to be a clear directive (such as 'not to eat of the tree of knowledge'), which is then disobeyed, to result in a 'crime'. Josef K. cannot accept sin or guilt, because no crime is defined. In Buddhism, the interpretation of sin is different, and is not limited to 'wrongdoing', but it can

also stretch to the act of separation: this is the ‘criminal’ act of the self, as it splits away from the rest of creation: suffering is thus a ‘natural’ punishment.

The Third Noble Truth

This selection of aphorisms deals with the cessation of suffering by eradicating the cause: thirst. Suffering is not insurmountable, unless the path of ignorance is chosen, along which attachment and desire are cultivated. The first two Noble Truths set out the problem and the cause; the third begins the process of addressing the solution.

Aphorism 6

Der entscheidende Augenblick der menschlichen Entwicklung ist immerwährend. Darum sind die revolutionären geistigen Bewegungen, welche alles frühere für nichtig erklären, im Recht, denn es ist noch nichts geschehn. (NSF2 114)

This aphorism walks a Buddhist tightrope as it declares that the key quality of human development is its permanent renewability, rather than its past achievements or future potential. It talks of revolution, but the message can be understood as one of evolution, change or impermanence. If we recognise the human self as an ongoing process, then there is less danger of becoming attached to its various forms. Buddhists do not deny the existence of a self, but rather the existence of a fixed, absolute one. The argument presented in this reflection runs along parallel lines, for if we accept that we are always developing, then any aspect of self that we cling to turns to dust in our hands. In this sense, Josef K. is a reactionary figure because he cannot let go of ‘alles Frühere’ and dismisses his arrest as ‘nichts’. Buddhism stresses the usefulness of meditation, as it heightens awareness of the moment (in which we can act) as opposed to the past or future, where actions are spent or unreal.

Aphorism 20

Leoparden brechen in den Tempel ein und saufen die Opferkrüge leer; das wiederholt sich immer wieder; schließlich kann man es voraussberechnen und es wird ein Teil der Ceremonie. (NSF2 117)

This aphorism appears to be at odds with aphorism 6, because it talks of an event which happens repeatedly, to the point at which it can be relied upon to happen – it becomes a certainty. Despite the apparent contradiction, however, the difference between the two is a matter of perception. The key aspect of the reflection is the word ‘Zeremonie’, for we are dealing here with habits, and the human tendency to look for patterns and meanings and knit them into an interlocking, overarching significance. It may well be that the leopards keep breaking into the temple, but that does not mean that we can make a rule out of it.²¹⁵ As we live our lives, we try to achieve certainty by defining our environment and building up the self, instead of dismantling its attachments.

Aphorism 30

Das Gute ist in gewissem Sinne trostlos. (NSF2 119)

This brief reflection gets to the very heart of Buddhist discussions on karma and selfhood, though it could appear cold to Western sensibilities, which would see good rewarded. Good is comfortless when there is no attachment or craving present; the person can act freely and unfettered, not manipulated by the self. As individuals we seek comfort in our image of self, but without an ego to sustain there would be no need for ‘Trost’. The self is not to be demonised as an evil entity, to be eradicated in order that enlightenment can

²¹⁵ The human tendency to cling to meaningful patterns is illustrated by this story: ‘One day Mara, the Evil One, was travelling through the villages of India with his attendants. He saw a man doing walking meditation whose face was lit up in wonder. The man had just discovered something on the ground in front of him. Mara’s attendant asked what that was and Mara replied, “A piece of truth.” “Doesn’t this bother you when someone finds a piece of truth, O Evil One?” his attendant asked. “No,” Mara replied. “Right after this, they usually make a belief out of it.”’ Quotation at www.myrkothum.com/the-10-very-best-zen-stories/.

dawn. Self is a necessity, and it is rather attachment to self that creates the demons that plague our world.

Aphorism 31

Nach Selbstbeherrschung strebe ich nicht. Selbstbeherrschung heißt: an einer zufälligen Stelle der unendlichen Ausstrahlungen meiner geistigen Existenz wirken wollen. Muß ich aber solche Kreise um mich ziehn, dann tue ich es besser untätig im bloßen Anstaunen des ungeheuerlichen Komplexes und nehme nur die Stärkung, die e contrario dieser Anblick gibt, mit nachhause. (NSF2 119-120)

This aphorism covers Buddhist ground in its references to the self, desire and contemplation. It employs a classic Zen style, and the pithy, punchy opening statement contains a surprise: the subject claims he does not strive for self-mastery, which ordinarily would rank as an admirable quality to pursue.

The reason for shunning self-mastery is not so much that there is something wrong with trying to control the self, but it is rather the way that we get driven by our actions. The best way to ‘describe circles’ around the self is to do it ‘without action’ – which appears to be another paradoxical statement, for ‘doing’ normally entails ‘Tätigkeit’. However, the key to the puzzle is supplied soon after by contrasting ‘acting’ with ‘gazing’ or ‘contemplating’. The activity of striving and doing reinforces the notion of the self and hence accumulates karma; on the contrary, self-mastery achieved through contemplation enables the viewer to observe the ‘ungeheuerliches Komplex’ (of the self) without clinging, and thereby gaining selfless ‘Stärkung’. This is the strength of withdrawal, the cessation of suffering.

The strength derived from shunning ‘Selbstbeherrschung’ would be seen as a sign of weakness from a Western point of view, and Tauber suggests that the thought ‘deprives life of its whole objectivity, of its whole weight’.²¹⁶ If

²¹⁶ Tauber, p. 229.

Kafka's writing is seen as an expression of the difficulty of adding weight or 'substance' to human existence, then it is inevitable that a negative interpretation will follow. Buddhism skirts round this issue by declaring that there is actually no 'weight' to anything, because all is emptiness. There is again a meditative element to this reflection in that control happens best when the 'unendliche Ausstrahlungen' of the self in all its projections and creations are ignored, akin to letting a tempest blow itself out, leaving behind the calm.

The Fourth Noble Truth

This selection of aphorisms offers thoughts on 'the Way'. Buddhism confronts directly such unpalatable truths as the inevitability of suffering, because it has an answer. The Noble Eightfold Path sets out the way to deal with the pain of existence, and within Kafka's aphorisms there is also a collection of suggestions indicating a way forward.

Aphorism 38

Einer staunte darüber, wie leicht er den Weg der Ewigkeit gieng; er raste ihn nämlich abwärts. (NSF2 121)

In this aphorism the theme of the path is considered, and the mood is upbeat as progress towards 'Ewigkeit' is 'leicht'. We learn, however, that the traveller was rushing 'abwärts' and, from a Western perspective, the downhill trajectory suggests that eternity may not be blissful.

To remain on a sombre note, this reflection could be read as an instance of how easily we are carried away by our desire to reach for heaven. Eternity should not be confused with salvation. In fact, from a Buddhist point of view and given the cyclical nature of existence, we are already stuck in eternity, and only enlightenment will find release from it. A number of figures in Kafka's fiction enjoy a deceptively smooth ride (downhill), before they start to experience discomfort. Georg Bendemann seems to have the world at his feet,

Josef K. has a high position in a bank, and K.'s early encounters with Castle officials make him feel confident of success. Their ease is illusory.

Aphorism 64

Die Vertreibung aus dem Paradies ist in ihrem Hauptteil ewig: Es ist also zwar die Vertreibung aus dem Paradies endgültig, das Leben in der Welt unausweichlich, die Ewigkeit des Vorgangs aber macht es trotzdem möglich, daß wir nicht nur dauernd im Paradiese bleiben könnten, sondern tatsächlich dort dauernd sind, gleichgültig ob wir es hier wissen oder nicht. (NSF2 127)

The 'Vertreibung aus dem Paradies' triggers birth into samsara, the conditioned world of life, death and rebirth. This is the realm of the self, of individuation, of separation from all other creation. This expulsion is 'endgültig' because we cannot travel back in time and stop it from happening. There is no way back to the innocence or purity of pre-expulsion paradise, but through enlightenment regarding the truth about existence, we would recognise that paradise (or nirvana) is actually here with us now, and accessible for those clear-sighted enough to enter it. Nirvana is not a place to go to, or a time to wait for, but a sustained degree of understanding. It is located on a particularly fine wavelength which can only be tuned into through clear understanding and mindfulness beyond the interference of the self.

4.3 Perlocutionary messages

I remember a short conversation between the Buddha and a philosopher of his time. 'I have heard that Buddhism is a doctrine of enlightenment. What is your method? What do you practice every day?' 'We walk, we eat, we wash ourselves, we sit down.' 'What is so special about that? Everyone walks, eats, washes, sits down.' 'Sir, when we walk, we are aware that we are walking; when we eat, we are aware that we are eating. When others walk, eat, wash, or sit down, they are generally not aware of what they are doing.'²¹⁷

217 Thich Nhat Hanh in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/awareness-what-were-doing.

The koan's apparently nonsensical or paradoxical content is designed to prompt the reader into the realisation that a rational, ordered, logical enquiry into the text is not always suitable for dealing with the underlying reality of emptiness. Skillful reading of a mind-boggling koan sees corroborative evidence of impermanence, not-self and suffering; unskillful reading bemoans its 'essential' irrationality or its hidden, 'locked' meaning, and feels a sense of frustration that the hitherto trustworthy tools of logic and reason have been rendered powerless and ineffectual. Richard Gray notes how the undermining of logical structures in aphorisms is common in Kafka's thought processes, through 'incessant retractions, recursions, negations, exclusions and qualifications'.²¹⁸

A selection of koan-like aphorisms follows, showing how there may be subtle differences in the type and force of perlocutionary effect which can be sought after in the reader. One approach deals with the *redefinition* of conventional reality and seeks to undermine the assumptions, rules and traditions which cause ignorance. Another approach goes somewhat further in that it aims to *dislocate* the reader from conventional reality altogether through an irrational statement and leave the way open to an understanding of emptiness.

Redefinition

The following aphorisms introduce familiar ideas and images from the dimension of conventional reality and subvert them in a way which could result in a less deluded understanding. The everyday world of objects, hopes, duties and mundane tasks is no less real for the fact that it is empty of intrinsic essence. Clear perception of ultimate reality does not cause conventional reality to vanish, and life continues to unfold. Its progress will,

²¹⁸ Richard Gray, p. 256.

however, be less painful once misguided views, attachments and desires are extinguished. In the same way, the Court can have Josef K. arrested to jolt him into a realisation of reality, but nothing is affected in the superficial comings and goings of his daily life.

Aphorism 1

Der wahre Weg geht über ein Seil, das nicht in der Höhe gespannt ist, sondern knapp über dem Boden. Es scheint mehr bestimmt stolpern zu machen, als begangen zu werden. (NSF2 113)

If any of Kafka's aphorisms could be described as bearing a 'classic' Zen koan style it would be aphorism 1. It is concise and compact, and displays a technique used in much of Kafka's other fiction. There is an opening statement, which is then qualified by successive statements which all contribute to a weakening of the opening position until we end up almost at the opposite pole.

We are told first of a true path, but within a few words it has been transformed into a tripwire. The difference between the two is considerable, given that one is meant to lead to a destination which benefits the traveller, such as salvation or happiness, whereas the other is there to frustrate, impede or injure.

Because of the way the aphorism is written, however, the steps from true path to tripwire progress smoothly without jarring too much, and this contributes to the sense of paradox when 'der wahre Weg' and 'Seil' are juxtaposed. First, the path is along a rope suspended above the ground, but only by a few inches. Walking along a rope calls up the idea of a tightrope, which suggests risk and difficulty, and this would fit well with the idea of a true path, because such spiritual paths are often not easy to follow and many travellers will fall by the wayside. However, the metaphor does not take this obvious extension after the initial comparison of path and rope, because the

rope is finally described as being perpendicular to the traveller, not in the same line of travel. It is here that the comparison jolts the reader, because the suggestion is that this 'true path' is something that runs against the grain, something that cuts across our expectations and interferes with our preferences and habitual actions. When embarking on a path, whether it leads east, west, north or south, the way should extend directly in front of us. In this instance, the supposedly 'true' path cuts across our 'natural' path. In other words, the true path is something which appears puzzling, unnatural or paradoxical.

Parallels with Zen practice can be drawn here because it is customary for Zen teachers to confound their pupils by presenting images which make no sense or appear back-to-front. The problem to be solved has no apparent logical or rational solution, but this is the point of the exercise, for the teacher is inviting the pupil to enter a world of contemplation which occupies a different dimension to that hitherto experienced. The disruption is a common technique designed to help the student unhook himself from a traditional way of thinking, and explore different avenues.

Aphorism 5

Von einem gewissen Punkt an gibt es keine Rückkehr mehr. Dieser Punkt ist zu erreichen. (NSF2 114)

This aphorism offers a short, sharp perlocutionary shock owing to an unexpected twist. It consists of a couple of brief statements which at first reading sound rather daunting, with the hint of a threat: a short introductory sentence written in familiar, idiomatic style is stood on its head. The idea of a point of no return can be rather unsettling, but if it is no return to suffering, then this point is desirable. It is not revealed exactly where this particular point in time or space is located, so the focus switches from the undefined point to the idea of *no return*, which from many Western viewpoints could

seem negative as it hints at banishment. The Buddhist reader would acknowledge a reference to the truth of impermanence: everything is in movement, and we cannot select a reverse gear for our lives. However, life is cyclical and we are subject to a constant round of rebirths through ignorance.

Aphorism 40

Nur unser Zeitbegriff läßt uns das Jüngste Gericht so nennen, eigentlich ist es ein Standrecht. (NSF2 122)

This text deals with the problem of perspective, and how any viewpoint expressed through the self must be based on delusion. The reflection on the Last Judgment is a variation on the theme of wrong view. If we subscribe to a linear appreciation of time, we are born, we live, we die, and after that we pass into an eternal afterlife following a final reckoning to determine our resting place. The Buddhist view of time is cyclical, so we are born, we live, we die, and then there is rebirth with another lifecycle, and so on. The effect of karma can be viewed as a kind of judgment, but it is neither final nor personal. The idea of the ‘Standrecht’ paints a grim picture, replacing the Pearly Gates with a firing squad, but it has a good perlocutionary shock factor. It disfigures the image of divine scales of justice carefully weighing up our deeds and conveys instead a more brutal truth: if we present ourselves before any court, we will always be sentenced to death. The only escape is through enlightened detachment from selfhood. This aphorism summarises in one sentence what *Der Proceß* does in hundreds of pages. Josef K. perceived his Court as ‘das Jüngste Gericht’ and tried to argue his case for a favourable ‘Freisprechung’, but the Court is actually a ‘Standrecht’ – the execution was inevitable given his inability to see beyond his own frame of reference.

Aphorism 54

Es gibt nichts anderes als eine geistige Welt; was wir sinnliche Welt nennen ist das Böse in der geistigen und was wir böse nennen ist nur eine Notwendigkeit eines Augenblicks unserer ewigen Entwicklung.

Mit stärkstem Licht kann man die Welt auflösen. Vor schwachen Augen wird sie fest, vor noch schwächeren bekommt sie Fäuste, vor noch schwächeren wird sie schamhaft und zerschmettert den, der sie anzuschauen wagt. (NSF2 124-125)

Aphorism 54 commences by hinting at an idea which is of pivotal importance to Buddhist thought, the notion that there is nothing of absolute, enduring quality in the world. All that we see has been mentally constructed, subject to constant development and generated by earlier forces, circumstances, actions or thoughts, either willed or random. Kafka's use of 'nur' to describe this world suggests that what we ordinarily chase after and preoccupy ourselves with is not worth the effort.

Though complex, there is nothing baffling about this reflection, but the second part of the aphorism bears the perlocutionary effect. It opens with conventional Buddhist imagery relating to sight and clarity of view: under a strong, penetrating light (e.g. here the light of the Dharma), the constructed world disappears. This suggests that clearsightedness has the benefit of being able to see through the world and note that nothing is absolute or worth clinging to. The aphorism then goes on to explore the converse by suggesting that weaker eyes – those not able to penetrate the veil of superficiality – will perceive the world as being 'fest', as having a stable, fixed, meaningful nature. The final turn of the aphorism moves from tightrope to tripwire as it comments on the correspondence between weaker vision (or greater ignorance) and stronger risk – the less we are prepared or able to look closely at the world and see through to its essential lack of substance, the more we are likely to suffer. The aphorism ends on a disturbing note as the world grows fists and swings a

punch. The violent twist hints at the fate that lies in store for the ignorant, such as Josef K. who dies a painful death at the hands of his executioners.

Aphorism 99

Wieviel bedrückender als die unerbittlichste Überzeugung von unserem gegenwärtigen sündhaften Stand ist selbst die schwächste Überzeugung von der einstigen ewigen Rechtfertigung unserer Zeitlichkeit. Nur die Kraft im Ertragen dieser zweiten Überzeugung, welche in ihrer Reinheit die erste voll umfaßt, ist das Maß des Glaubens.

Manche nehmen an, daß neben dem großen Urbetrug noch in jedem Fall eigens für sie ein kleiner besonderer Betrug veranstaltet wird, daß also wenn ein Liebesspiel auf der Bühne aufgeführt wird, die Schauspielerin außer dem verlogenen Lächeln für ihren Geliebten auch noch ein besonders hinterhältiges Lächeln für den ganz bestimmten Zuschauer auf der letzten Gallerie hat. Das heißt zu weit gehn. (NSF2 135-136)

The first part of this complicated aphorism regards justification of human ephemerality as more oppressive than the conviction of our present sinful state; in other words, more suffering is caused by the attempt to bestow meaning on our transitory lives, than is felt by the burden of wrong actions. The Buddhist view is that human pain is linked to claiming personal definitions, drawing lines in the quicksand. If we admit to sins, we can try to behave better; if we cannot admit to intrinsic emptiness, we will always be chasing shadows. The perlocutionary element is supplied by the concluding thought that ‘das Maß des Glaubens’ (a positive Judaeo-Christian concept) is related to how tenaciously we can cling to our delusions of meaningfulness.

The second part of the aphorism illustrates the classic ‘Why me?’ complaint of the unenlightened sufferer. From a Buddhist point of view, suffering is not something imposed on us by the external world, but something that exists as we impose our self onto the world. To a Judaeo-Christian mindset, there is often no answer to ‘Why me?’, and it is shattering to discover that there is no discernible underlying organising principle to our universe, or

at least a structure in which the inconvenience of unjust suffering is later compensated for, as if we are 'owed' an explanation for agreeing to the concept of universal order. If our immediate reaction when trouble strikes is to think 'Why me?', there will be no way past suffering. According to Buddhist thinking, we fail to come into contact with the real world when we view events through the filter of selfhood. This failure is represented by the spectator who imagines that certain gestures performed by an actress on stage are directed specifically at him – these secret winks and nods are harmless and trivial, but they reveal the spectator's thirst for meaningful involvements and attachments.

Dislocation

In a popular Hollywood movie, an intrepid secret agent receives a message containing an impossible mission which he can choose to accept or reject: whatever his choice, the message will self-destruct in five seconds. There is something of the mission impossible about understanding the emptiness of ultimate reality, and Zen masters use koans to light the fuse which causes reasoning powers to self-destruct. The perlocutionary effect stuns the senses, leaving the self unable to function. The enlightened receiver of the message should choose neither to accept nor reject the mission, but just acknowledge its impossibility.

In this type of koan, the paradox of mutually exclusive propositions presents 'mission impossible' scenarios. It is hard to see how one can exist outside one's own circle, or how 'freuen' can pair up with 'flüchten', so any rational attempt to float a meaningful interpretation in these vessels will end up on the rocks. But that is where the Zen master wants to see his pupils – shipwrecked in dangerous waters. The pupil's conventional thought processes and assumptions have been disturbed or challenged. The dislocation from rational thinking and logical structures is unsettling and frightening, but it is

a 'true' representation of emptiness in which there is no reason or order. The sooner the reader can forget attachments and adjust to the fluid conditions, the quicker he will regain equilibrium and achieve enlightenment.

Aphorism 15

Wie ein Weg im Herbst: kaum ist er rein gekehrt, bedeckt er sich wieder mit den trockenen Blättern. (NSF2 117)

This aphorism is a short, poetic sentence, which on the surface seems largely uncontroversial and straightforward: autumn leaves obscuring a forest path. One thing is missing, however, and that is the subject. Something is compared to the autumn path, but this is not revealed. The theme of the path is shared with other aphorisms in the sense of following a philosophical or spiritual track to salvation or enlightenment. The path is continually covered in leaves, cleared, swept clear and obscured again. So there is a cyclical element to treading the path which suggests that there is no easy route towards purity. To be able to follow the path to nirvana, it has to be kept free of hindrances and obstacles, such as desires and cravings. A clear path suggests a clear mind, the mind in meditation emptied of personality and selfhood.

Tauber takes a very different view, as the leaf-strewn path represents a personal challenge: 'Man must prove himself in the world with his truth.'²¹⁹ It is almost as if the man is defined by the path and his true nature needs to be kept clear of unwanted objects. For Buddhists, life is never neat and tidy, as the truth of impermanence constantly blows leaves onto our path.

Aphorism 25

Wie kann man sich über die Welt freuen, außer wenn man zu ihr flüchtet? (NSF2 118)

²¹⁹ Tauber, p. 246.

This aphorism is very close in form to a Zen koan, in that it is unusual to rejoice in flight, or flee towards a place rather than away from it. The purpose of this kind of expression can often be to confound and jolt the student into enlightenment. There is no solution as such, but the purpose is to get the reader to reconsider conventional practice and thought, and find new relationships between internal and external worlds in order to get used to living without a solution. One possible approach to this aphorism would be to keep in mind the unstable nature of selfhood. Joy would be accessible by avoiding the pitfalls of a conditioned self and connecting directly to a world via unfiltered sense perceptions, that is, without passing through the 'I'. In this sense, it could be seen that we have to 'flee from' the corrupted views of our attached self and 'flee to' a world without this kind of suffering. Cessation of suffering comes through cutting off desires and severing attachments.

Aphorism 26

Verstecke sind unzählige, Rettung nur eine, aber Möglichkeiten der Rettung wieder so viele wie Verstecke.

Es gibt ein Ziel, aber keinen Weg; was wir Weg nennen, ist Zögern. (NSF2 118)

The first part of aphorism 26 (crossed out by Kafka) belongs to the type of short, paradoxical statements which at first glance raise more questions than they supply answers. Initially there is a comparison between 'Verstecke' and 'Rettung', as if they were opposites. It is not explicit what the hiding places are offering protection from, nor who or what is being hidden, but the contrast with salvation suggests that it could be a matter of the self clinging to its own existence.

In Buddhist terms, salvation is not to be understood spatially or temporally, for it is potentially already with us here and now. It is rather to be understood as a kind of release from conditioned existence, from dependence on birth and arising, but not through destruction or annihilation. This

aphorism hints at how salvation cannot be reached as long as the self has secreted itself in difficult-to-access places. Salvation is 'one', beyond the duality occasioned by the separation of the self. But the 'possibilities' of salvation are as numerous as there are hiding places, because the path to salvation is revealed everywhere a self is uncovered.

There is only one salvation, though its point of access is not fixed. This means that there could be many ways of realising nirvana, as many as there are hideaways where the self has erected a barricade and is refusing to come out.

The second part of the aphorism seems to contrast with the first in that there is no way towards 'das Ziel', which could be understood as no possibility of salvation. The opening statement is qualified, however, when the reference to 'Weg' is replaced by 'Zögern'. Confusion about how the destination is to be reached would linger, unless it was understood that the idea of a destination is the wrong way to view salvation or nirvana. The arrival point is defined as a specific place, located in time and space, but nirvana resists definition and location. Similarly, the path followed by Buddhists is not so much a means to an end, or a way to a goal, but the means and end all rolled into one. The Noble Eightfold Path sets out how enlightenment can be nurtured and sustained, so as to maintain mindfulness and fight ignorance. So, the aim is almost to keep walking on the path and develop an engagement with the Dharma, not focus on one point where the road stops to mark a happy ending. This is another example of an apparent paradox concealing a simple truth.

Tauber refers to the idea of 'inner truth', to deal with the roadblock. If there is a goal but no path leading to it, we just need to believe, to have 'trusting surrender'.²²⁰ This solution is an external one and is doomed to

²²⁰ Tauber, p. 247.

failure; the Zen view would stress the impossibility of reaching the goal by conventional, linear means and hope to trigger a different approach, perhaps by questioning the need for goals which are inaccessible.

Aphorism 34

Sein Ermatten ist das des Gladiators nach dem Kampf, seine Arbeit war das Weißtünchen eines Winkels in einer Beamtenstube. (NSF2 120)

The juxtaposition of the extraordinary with the ordinary, or of the spectacular with the mundane is another favourite Zen tactic, that of jarring the seeker out of ignorance into enlightenment. This two-part aphorism operates on different levels. First, there is the mismatch between the noble gladiatorial arena and the humble 'Beamtenstube', and then there is the added incongruity of fighting and whitewashing. In addition, it seems that holding a paintbrush can cause the same exhaustion as gladiatorial combat; and to stretch the incongruity to breaking point, the whitewashing only covers a corner of a room. According to Tauber, 'the success of earthly efforts seems ridiculous'.²²¹

From a Buddhist perspective, however, the apparently overblown comparison of spectacular battle and plain decorating does stand up to scrutiny. If the focus shifts from the deed to the effort, from the action to the concentration, then a grain of truth can be located in the reflection. In this respect, whitewashing a wall can involve as much mindfulness as slaying a bear. If one 'loses one's self' in the activity, it can be a liberating experience. Our actions and thoughts come and go, arise and fade with great regularity, but the power of meditation is such that it can sustain a clear focus on the truth about the world.

²²¹ Tauber, p. 228.

Aphorism 35

Es gibt kein Haben, nur ein Sein, nur ein nach letztem Atem, nach Ersticken verlangendes Sein. (NSF2 120)

This aphorism ‘chokes’ the reader with its dense expression and gloomy talk of ‘Ersticken’, but retains a Buddhist feel through its reference to The Three Universal Characteristics. Yearning for death is a result of the no-man’s land between ‘kein Haben’ on the one hand and ‘Sein’ with its death wish on the other. There is always risk of attachment in the idea of selfhood, and this is where mindfulness is effective as a broom to sweep out hidden desires.

A Buddhist reader would be able to agree with the notion of ‘kein Haben’ because its message of no possession dovetails with that of impermanence and non-attachment. If there is no ‘Haben’, that leaves ‘Sein’, but that too is subject to impermanence and non-attachment, so it is not possible always to stay what we ‘are’. The image is unsettling, but it is simply a way of expressing the constant renewal of the self.

Aphorism 37

Seine Antwort auf die Behauptung, er besitze vielleicht, sei aber nicht, war nur Zittern und Herzklopfen. (NSF2 121)

Broaching the theme of attachment, this single-sentence aphorism offers a paradox in the Zen tradition, as it turns on the conflict between possession and non-existence. The opening part of the clause reports an assumption or charge, that of possessing, but not existing. This is an unusual assertion, for to be in possession of something a person must presumably already exist. In a further twist, this rather vague and confusing charge still manages to unsettle the addressee to the extent that he suffers physical distress.

Read from a Buddhist perspective, however, the idea of possessing without existing is less problematic. Taking possession needs a possessor, and

that is expressed as 'I'. Once the ego is born, what is lost is an unmediated experience of existence. Life as 'a person' consists of an accumulation of possessions – feelings, desires, and fears, as well as objects – and the person does not exist in a pure, integral sense. The individual is too busy fortifying the ramparts of the self to notice his division and disappearance from the rest of the universe. Josef K. is in possession of power and status, but the subtlest of changes is enough to shake his world to the foundations, for he cannot produce any concrete evidence of who he is or what he represents.

Aphorism 69

Theoretisch gibt es eine vollkommene Glücksmöglichkeit: An das Unzerstörbare in sich glauben und nicht zu ihm streben. (NSF2 128)

This aphorism exhibits the kind of paradoxical statement that has long been the staple of Zen koans. 'Glücksmöglichkeit' is rarely discussed in the aphorisms, but here the path to happiness lies in belief in the indestructible, but not looking for it. At first sight, this appears contradictory, because it does not sound right to believe in something, but not attempt to communicate with or relate to it.

Beyond the paradox, however, the aphorism works on two levels. First, if 'glauben' is taken at face value, then it should follow that it is unnecessary – even undesirable – to try to substantiate it. If a person has a belief in God, he is happy to acknowledge the existence of God without having direct proof. Searching for evidence for God would suggest very shaky grounds for belief; if this God were discovered, belief would then not be required anyway. Second, and this corresponds to the Buddhist point of view, the focus is not on the belief, but on the thing which is indestructible. If this is understood to be Buddha nature (the essence of the Dharma teaching that all things are one until we break them down into selves) then it is impossible to look for it. Buddha nature is that which purely is, without mediation, without

characteristics, without qualities and self, so the only way to comprehend it is by 'not looking' or by stripping away all the effects of individuation which the self tries to sustain to keep itself distinct from the indestructible. Happiness here is not a commodity but a release from the strains of upholding the self's separation. Robertson links *Das Unzerstörbare* to Schopenhauer's 'will', as a 'vital force supplying one's life with sustenance and impetus'.²²² 'Glücksmöglichkeit', as such, is not realised by possessing *das Unzerstörbare*, but by attuning to it, i.e. 'not union but equilibrium'.²²³ The hunger artist has a very strong belief in something indestructible – his perfect fasting – but he strives after it, whereas post-Bürgerl. K. provides the best example of how to lose striving but gain control.

Aphorism 80

Wahrheit ist unteilbar, kann sich also selbst nicht erkennen; wer sie erkennen will, muß Lüge sein. (NSF2 130)

Aphorism 80 runs parallel with the reflections on the indestructible: the truth asserts its indivisibility and, because of this oneness, misses as falsehood whatever claims to recognise it. This thought suggests that entities such as the indestructible or the truth cannot be owned or claimed, in the sense that any single individual could say that he or she possesses a soul, or that truth is on his or her side. The truth is nothing but the truth, and it does not belong anywhere or to anyone.

To recognise ourselves we look in the mirror, but what we see is not ourselves, but a reflection of ourselves. The difficulty of this thought comes in the joining of truth and falsehood: only 'Lüge' can understand 'Wahrheit'. This impasse is Zen-like and would require somersaults in logic to find a

²²² Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism*, p. 200.

²²³ Ibid., p. 201.

resolution. The sticking point is the insistence on 'erkennen', just as K. insisted on Castle recognition.

Aphorism 90

Zwei Möglichkeiten: sich unendlich klein machen oder es sein. Das erste ist Vollendung also Untätigkeit, das zweite Beginn, also Tat. (NSF2 133)

This aphorism gets its perlocutionary effect from a paradox in its instructions, using a 'reverse polarity' technique. The alternative options, of making oneself infinitesimally small or being so, are described respectively as inaction and action, when it would seem that the 'making' should correspond with action and the 'being' should correspond with inaction. The Zen response, however, would turn the paradox on its head by linking the subject to a discussion of the self. In this way, perfection is achieved by constant mindfulness and reduction of the self to its smallest possible size, until it shrinks to zero: it takes concentrated effort to do nothing. The opposite possibility is to be infinitely small, but in a world marked by impermanence this can only mark the beginning of a process, and hence implies action.

Aphorism 94

Zwei Aufgaben des Lebensanfangs: Deinen Kreis immer mehr einschränken und immer wieder nachprüfen, ob Du Dich nicht irgendwo außerhalb Deines Kreises versteckt hältst. (NSF2 134)

In the same vein as aphorism 90, the task here is to rein in the self, to cut back its sphere of influence. The paradoxical twist comes in a reminder to make sure that 'you' do not hide outside this sphere. It would seem impossible for oneself to stand simultaneously inside and outside the territory of the self. However, the self-preservation instincts of the self work in many ways and the individual must always be on his guard (mindful) to ensure that no little 'pockets' of selfhood are left uncovered.

Tauber's view of this exercise in limiting the self suggests a means of filtering out unwanted elements in the self to retain an 'inner purity', rather than continuing the filtering indefinitely until the self disappears altogether.²²⁴ Suffering will be the result of partial self-limiting as this inner self will always remain elusive and indefinable. The chaplain in *Der Proceß* urges Josef K. to give up looking for 'fremde Hilfe', as a way of restricting the circles of influences built up by the self. K.'s execution is proof that traces of self were 'versteckt' elsewhere.

Aphorism 103

Du kannst Dich zurückhalten von den Leiden der Welt, das ist Dir freigestellt und entspricht Deiner Natur, aber vielleicht ist gerade dieses Zurückhalten das einzige Leid, das Du vermeiden könntest. (NSF2 137)

Aphorism 103 explores the misguidedness of taking the self as a refuge. Buddhist teaching maintains that the outside world is characterised by impermanence, and we should not grow attached to any of its objects, otherwise suffering will ensue. By the same token, our internal world – what we call our self – is equally subject to the condition of impermanence which governs all existence. Hence, there is no hiding place inside ourselves to which we can run for shelter. The shelter is the Dharma, the truth about the nature of the world. So while it is possible to withdraw from the world to spare ourselves some pain, there is other suffering awaiting us within which is more difficult to escape.

The perlocutionary aspect comes in the classic Kafka ruse of offering a bold statement, only to retract it later with reservations. We are told how it might be possible to avoid suffering on a global scale, but this withdrawal is described as 'einzig', as if it is severely limited in its scope or effectiveness. The

²²⁴ Tauber, p. 244.

seeming paradox can be solved if we introduce the internal personal self as a counterpart to the external impersonal world. We often talk of the 'world within', so it then becomes more sensible to understand how avoiding conflicts in the huge world outside is meaningless, if we fail to deal with the infinite problems posed inside by our attachment to self. If the reality of suffering is acknowledged, the one suffering that can be avoided is that of clinging to selfhood, of retreating into the self for protection.

Aphorism 104

Der Mensch hat freien Willen und zwar dreierlei:

Erstens war er frei, als er dieses Leben wollte; jetzt kann er es allerdings nicht mehr rückgängig machen, denn er ist nicht mehr jener, der es damals wollte, es wäre denn insoweit, als er seinen damaligen Willen ausführt, indem er lebt.

Zweitens ist er frei, indem er die Gangart und den Weg dieses Lebens wählen kann.

Drittens ist er frei, indem er als derjenige, der er einmal wieder sein wird, den Willen hat, sich unter jeder Bedingung durch das Leben gehen und auf diese Weise zu sich kommen zu lassen und zwar auf einem zwar wählbaren, aber jedenfalls derartig labyrinthischen Weg, daß er kein Fleckchen dieses Lebens unberührt läßt.

Das ist das Dreierlei des freien Willens, es ist aber auch, da es gleichzeitig ist, ein Einerlei und ist im Grunde so sehr Einerlei, daß es keinen Platz hat für einen Willen, weder für einen freien noch unfreien. (NSF2 137-138)

This aphorism is one of the most tortuous, puzzling and paradoxical of Kafka's reflections. The reader is 'ambushed' as he reads through a well-constructed description of free will, only to be told at the end of the text that there is no will in existence, free or otherwise.

The aphorism is split into five parts and appears to set out a detailed analysis of the threefold nature of free will, through introduction, body and conclusion. The main points of the argument put forward the case for free will as an agent in a person's past, present and future. The summary condenses

the three strands of free will into one simultaneous entity, before finally declaring that there is no room in life for any kind of will at all, regardless of its nature.

It is difficult to make sense of such contradictory logic, where arguments are constructed clearly, before being dismissed with peremptory notice. If the intended effect is to startle or confound, the aphorism resembles the kind of literary vehicle used in Zen Buddhist practices. It is not sufficient, however, just to be obscure and obtuse; there must be a method to the apparent madness.

The key to this koan lies in the ideas of delusion and perspective; it must be understood that our volition gives birth to the karmic energy which fuels our lifecycle. The powers and rights that we (claim to) possess belong to us in a theoretical sense, but are not 'real' in the sense that they are absolute. The self we look after from moment to moment, from past to future, passes through time as a series of provisional drafts of a self. It is on loan to us for the duration of our lives and is never completed. Whatever we willed in the past, we reap the consequences in the present; we are also able to choose what to do in the present, and those choices will play a part in our future. The three come together in the present, in that it is actually just in the present that anything happens – the past is always gone, and the future is always distant. Finally, in an ideal, fully enlightened state, we would not need to concern ourselves with free will at all, because it is a desire of the self. Disabused of our ignorance, we could act from a position of insight and realise that, to obtain release from the world of samsara, we need freedom from the will to be truly free. If we were not deluded by the need to placate the self, we would recognise the interconnection of past, present and future, and we would see how our desire for free will is just one more way in which the self tries to define itself and defend itself from attack.

4.4 Conclusion

*According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine', selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world.*²²⁵

The aphorisms occupy an important position in Kafka's literary output, because they signpost developments and sensibilities in his literature (rather than his personal philosophy), from expressions which display mixed elements of Western and Buddhist thought, to a style and delivery which are better explained in analogy to Buddhist methods.

These reflections also appear at a transitional point in Kafka's writing, for they show a shift in themes from initial reservations about how the individual can live in a dualistic world to a more enlightened view of the dangers of attachment. They bear comparison with Kafka's narrative writing, both in terms of subject matter and style, through the prominence of the 'fragmentary' and 'anti-systematic'.²²⁶ These features are in tune with concepts such as emptiness and impermanence, and thus at odds with the quest for wholeness or closure that is characteristic of a Western frame of reference.

Furthermore, while Kafka's work can be divided into phases, it still retains a coherent feel across early, middle and late periods, both thematically and stylistically. The aphorisms play a significant role in determining the nature of any patterns or commonalities because they reflect in one place a number of features from across Kafka's oeuvre. This is not to overstate the importance of the aphorisms, but simply to make use of a confluence of typical topics and techniques.

²²⁵ Rahula, p. 51.

²²⁶ Richard Gray sees close ties between Kafka's aphorisms and his wider fiction, p. 17.

If some of Kafka's aphorisms confound and unsettle, this reaction can be taken as their purpose, rather than as the consequence of the disturbing content. That we suffer for no apparent reason is not really 'the point' of Kafka's writing; the fact that we needlessly and irrationally build this suffering into the framework for our existence constitutes the story which Kafka's texts deliver, often through the medium rather than the message. It is in this respect that parallels can be drawn between novels of hundreds of pages and aphorisms of a single sentence.

The next chapter looks at *Das Schloß*, which carries the most significant perlocutionary event, from a Buddhist perspective, in the transformation of K.

Chapter 5 *Das Schloß*

5.1 Introduction

*Letting go of fixation is effectively a process of learning to be free, because every time we let go of something, we become free of it. Whatever we fixate upon limits us because fixation makes us dependent upon something other than ourselves. Each time we let go of something, we experience another level of freedom.*²²⁷

Das Schloß is Kafka's next great work after *Der Proceß* and it is hewn from the same raw materials: an unknown individual is faced with a life-defining challenge, apparently thwarted by a powerful, inscrutable authority and surrounded by helpers who offer questionable support. In *Das Schloß* the canvas is painted with a familiar collection of gloomy rooms, inclement weather, obstructive officials and an ambivalent central character who seems to receive and issue unfair treatment in equal measure.

Despite the familiar atmosphere, *Das Schloß* succeeds in opening a completely new vista in Kafka's work through its differences. From a Buddhist viewpoint, the main development is that K. represents the first Kafka hero to demonstrate a degree of spiritual enlightenment. At the end of the novel, K. is not only alive, but free from the futile struggle that had ensnared him. His stated aims are not fulfilled, but the evidence suggests that K. has revised his initial, deluded claims and refocused to a more skillful way of leading his life. Ronald Gray notes the same oppressiveness in *Das Schloß* that characterises his earlier works, but he too finds a novel 'with more moving humanity', attributing this to the directness of K. who is active, critical and positive where Josef K. is passive, acquiescent and negative.²²⁸ There is a clear decision to let go of a fixation and, as suggested by Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche above, this marks a step towards freedom.

²²⁷ Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/learning-let-go-0.

²²⁸ Ronald D. Gray, *Franz Kafka* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 52-53.

The darkness of the novel serves as a backdrop to accentuate K.'s eventual progress. This dissertation argues that a pessimistic reading of the novel is inevitable if K. is regarded as a victim of mankind's doomed fate rather than his own misguided choices. At regular intervals during K.'s struggle, we are told of disillusionment and disappointment, but these stem from a wrongheaded insistence on setting unreachable targets, such as the security of selfhood. The air of futility is lifted at the end of the novel, when K. learns to relinquish his ill-advised obsessions after a chance meeting with secretary Bürgel.

Kafka's two great novels are separated by half a dozen years, with the intervening time spent reflecting on the consequences of failing health and a failed engagement. This may have prepared the ground for a confluence of aphoristic and fictional writing, and hence *Das Schloß* commands both a philosophical undercurrent and a compelling narrative.²²⁹

Das Schloß appears to resonate more strongly with the Buddhist model of enlightenment than Kafka's previous works. In *Der Proceß*, a fluid combination of illocutionary and perlocutionary devices suggest Josef K.'s attachment to innocence contributes to his suffering, but whatever form the message takes, he does not respond skillfully to the spiritual guidance offered. In *Das Schloß*, the narrative accommodates a more structured progression in that K.'s stay in the village can be tracked through a series of challenges, warnings and setbacks that culminate in his shift from ignorance to relative enlightenment. The novel oscillates between periods of *action* (where K. stakes his claim in a variety of ways) and *reflection* (where K. gathers or is presented with information about his quest which needs to be processed to re-assess his situation).

229 Ronald Gray detects an impetus for *Das Schloß* from Kafka's stay in Zürau, p. 140.

There is evidence that some insight filters through into K.'s consciousness, hence it is worth focusing on the moments of reflection separately. While direct warnings and koan-style jolts have no discernible effect on Josef K., with K. the situation is different. He engages much more with the community and appears to digest the information which is fed through to him. He is already clear on the nature of his suffering (lack of official status), but unlike Josef K. he recognises the damaging effect of his desire and takes the enlightened step towards cessation of his attachments.

This key difference in outlook between *Das Schloß* and *Der Proceß* stems from two factors: a) K. belongs to a community and is exposed to the same pressures and challenges, whereas Josef K. is isolated in his suffering; and b) K.'s presence in the village, his lack of satisfaction and his frustrations are all self-imposed. While Josef K. was confronted with the news of his arrest by the Court and mounts a rearguard action in 'self-defence', K. arrives in the village 'on the attack', laying claim to a position which he feels is rightfully his.

The option to renounce the Castle quest is always open and is never accompanied by the threat of punishment. Josef K. cannot give up his quest for innocence, since he assumes his life is at stake. K., however, does not even face 'Hinauswurf' from the community, so his situation is less critical or desperate. Although K. describes his quest as a 'fight for his existence', it is in reality more about the quality of his life than his survival.

The differences are subtle, but there is common ground too: from a Buddhist point of view both men choose to take up opposition to authorities which do not invite confrontation or resistance, but encourage recognition of the truth of attachment. For Josef K., the arrest and its related guilt assume the weight of a punishment, when they could be seen as natural by-products of his ignorance. The event of the arrest is the Court's way of awakening Josef K. from his spiritual slumber and warning him of the dangers of attachment.

In *Das Schloß*, K. talks specifically about his 'Existenz' and 'Recht', but there is no threat of punishment, just the pain of failure to reach a goal. K.'s suffering is essentially the product of a 'non-event' (official land surveyor status) and his reaction to it.

The clearest definition of K.'s quest is delivered to Amalia: 'meine Angelegenheiten mit den Behörden in Ordnung zu bringen, ist mein höchster, eigentlich mein einziger Wunsch' (DS 268).²³⁰ Hence, the underlying argument of this dissertation – that *tanha* (thirst, craving, wish) provides the powerful undercurrent that pulls the individual down into suffering – is openly stated as the driving force of the central character. He eventually learns to detach himself from claims on absolute certainty and settles for 'normal' village life.

In his initial desperation to establish recognition from the Castle, K. believes the best way forward is through connections (attachments). Rather than feeling pity for the forsaken land surveyor, rebuffed at every turn by faceless bureaucrats and impenetrable, indecipherable protocols, the Buddhist reader would lay the blame for K.'s failures squarely at his own ignorant practices. He tries to 'weave' himself into the fabric of the village and become a part of the whole. But whatever he tries to possess turns to dust as nothing has any lasting presence. K. scuttles around the village from contact to contact, spinning a web of connections in a bid to achieve a relationship with the Castle. But the end product is just entanglement in a jumble of threads stretching haphazardly between Frieda, Barnabas, Olga and semi-official figures such as the village mayor ('der Gemeindevorsteher'), the innkeepers and secretaries.

For Ronald Gray, K.'s fixations could assume noble proportions in the 'ceaseless attempt at penetrating to the innermost depths and conquering

230 Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß*, ed. Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1982). References relate to this edition and are marked DS, followed by the page number.

them', and there is no disgrace in losing to the Castle, but a 'liberation of some sort'.²³¹ This interpretation puts a positive spin on K.'s failure, but shows how much value is invested in discovering (or creating) meaning. The issue is not the quest per se, but the attachment to the quest; not self per se, but attachment to self. The Four Noble Truths explain how seeking to attach ourselves to our surroundings guarantees suffering, as we can never hope to hang on to anything we cling to. A Buddhist reading of *Das Schloß* points to several cases of K. falling foul of this misconception. The delusions of attachment are present in many of K.'s dealings with other characters in the novel, and mostly they lead to disappointment.

Buddhism treats 'meaning' with caution, thus K.'s quest after a meaningful, official position is seen as delusion, a vain chase after his own tail, borne of ignorance. K. is not heroic, because for the greater part of the novel he stubbornly pursues an illusion, contrary to the facts at hand. There is nothing to be admired in blindly attaching oneself to a misguided sense of self. In this respect, K.'s unilateral declaration of independence serves as an illustration of the pain in store for those clinging to a mirage, because all his efforts to assert himself yield nothing but suffering.

For the majority of the novel, there seems to be no way out for K., and his meanderings through the village never bring him nearer to his goal. No matter how much information he gathers, no matter how many allies he makes, no matter how cunningly or obstinately he executes his plans, he fails because he is simply seeking knowledge for the wrong reason or with the wrong motivation. He needs insight, not information. The mountains of documents kept by village officials should suffice to reveal how futile it would be to try and build up a picture of the Castle and its operations. The jigsaw has an infinite

231 Ronald Gray links the quest to European thinking's search for knowledge, p. 167.

number of pieces which are always renewing themselves, but K. keeps trying to collect them and build up a coherent picture. Here is a case of an individual trying to complete a puzzle from the centre (self) outwards, without the benefit of finite borders to give guidance.

The next two sections follow the methodology outlined in the opening chapter. The first part investigates the information that is presented to K. (both by illocutionary and perlocutionary means) and the actions and reflections he undertakes, with reference to Buddhist teaching. The second part considers the character of K., and how his conduct and attitude contribute to his suffering.

5.2 Tightropes and tripwires

*The false sense of self is the root of afflictions: ignorance working through the false sense of self is thus at the root of our being limited to the rounds of birth and death, and thus at the root of all our hankering and suffering.*²³²

In *Der Proceß*, we saw that Josef K. made no progress along the tightrope of understanding (illocutions) and fell over every tripwire (perlocutions) without being jolted from his delusions. In *Das Schloß*, K. emerges from a week in the village with a changed perspective on his environment and circumstances. He engages in a very active struggle with the Castle and its representatives, but he also takes time to listen, and it is ultimately his ability to reflect and adjust that leads to a more positive outcome than befell Josef K.

K.'s experiences in the village oscillate between action and reflection and can be presented as follows:

1. Action: arrival and aims (Frieda, Klamm)
2. Reflection: Castle law (mayor, Gardena)
3. Action: staking claims (sledge, school)

²³² K. Venkata Ramanan in Titmuss, p. 48.

4. Reflection: village law (tales of community members)
5. Action: dealing with consequences (Gehilfen, Frieda)
6. Reflection: special law (Bürgerl's loophole)
7. Action: letting go (self, others)

In the early stages (1-3) of his quest, K. effectively continues from where Josef K. finished, aggressively staking claims 'mit zwanzig Händen'. He endures a number of frustrations, defeats and humiliations which all combine to exacerbate his suffering and underline the dangers of attachment. By the middle stages (4-5), K. starts to react differently to the information that is presented to him about the Castle. He deals less harshly with the assistants and treats Frieda with greater openness and respect. The final stages (6-7) culminate in the special communication with Bürgerl, which is followed by the appearance of a 'detached' K. engaged with Castle officials and villagers. In stark contrast with the ending of *Der Proceß*, K. experiences no suffering at all, and appears at ease and philosophical in his last two conversations, with Pepi and the 'Wirtin'.²³³ It can be concluded that the meeting with Bürgerl causes a Zen-like transformation in K., who embraces emptiness (sunyata) as a positive and peaceful way of engaging with life.

K.'s progression corresponds loosely to the development depicted in The Four Noble Truths, charting movement from darkness into (relative) light. In the first stages of action/reflection noted above, K.'s suffering (The First Noble Truth) is established as being caused by his attachment to personal quests (The Second Noble Truth); through Bürgerl, K. learns about cessation of craving (The Third Noble Truth) and in the last stage he practises aspects of the path (The Fourth Noble Truth), by displaying right understanding, right view, right speech and right livelihood.

²³³ To avoid confusion, the landlady at the Bridge Inn will be referred to as Gardena, while her counterpart at the *Herrenhof* will be referred to as the 'Wirtin'.

5.2.1 Arrival and aims (action)

A monk asked a Master, 'Show me the way without appealing to words'. Said the Master, 'Ask me without using words'.²³⁴

The opening three chapters of the novel set the tone for K.'s stay in the village by introducing the quest, revealed during K.'s arrival at the Bridge Inn as a desire for official recognition from the Castle as 'Landvermesser'. This aim provides the undercurrent to the whole work and K. pursues it through two channels: official (for example, via Klamm) and personal (via Frieda).

K.'s single-minded determination to penetrate the Castle is clear from his first day in the village, but ambivalence soon creeps in: 'Die Augen auf das Schloß gerichtet, ging K. weiter, nichts sonst kümmerte ihn. Aber im Näherkommen enttäuschte ihn das Schloß' (DS 17). Shortly thereafter, on meeting the schoolteacher, it seems life in the village would not be that fulfilling either: 'Ich bleibe hier längere Zeit und fühle mich schon jetzt ein wenig verlassen, zu den Bauern gehöre ich nicht und ins Schloß wohl auch nicht' (DS 20). The tone is set for one disappointment after another, and a Buddhist view of K.'s misguided quest would expect nothing more.

After a short, uncomfortable stay with Lasemann, K. waits for a passing sledge on the road to the Castle but is informed by the onlooking Gerstäcker that there is no traffic on that path. The phrase 'hier ist kein Verkehr' in connection with the Castle gives K. an early indication of how difficult it will be to establish firm links with authority. K.'s quest to gain entry to the Castle suffers a further blow later that evening, when he heads off with Barnabas in the deep snow after latching on to him at the inn. The Castle is his 'Ziel', but he struggles to keep his thoughts focused under the conditions: 'Statt auf das Ziel gerichtet zu bleiben, verwirrten sie sich' (DS 49). He hangs on to Barnabas but loses focus on his purpose and his mind wanders back to a moment of

²³⁴ Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism*, p. 102.

youthful triumph when he became one of the few local boys to scale a high cemetery wall: 'das Gefühl dieses Sieges schien ihm damals für ein langes Leben einen Halt zu geben' (DS 50). The question of how much such an achievement could spur him on in difficult times is soon answered when they negotiate their way through the snow, only for K. to realise they have not arrived at the Castle gates, but are standing outside Barnabas's front door. Just as climbing the wall did not open up any new vistas (there were gaps offering access to the adjacent graveyard anyway), K. prevails over the weather conditions to no effect. Most of K.'s 'triumphs' are empty and pointless in this way. The apparently 'leichtes Ziel' (DS 50) turns out to be a more problematic target: the theme of the spluttering quest is thus established.

Crestfallen, K. declines the opportunity to stay with Barnabas and ends up at the *Herrenhof*, where he meets Frieda. It is not long before he actively re-attaches himself to his 'goal', by trying to win Frieda from Klamm. No sooner has he claimed her love, than absent-mindedness sets in. Frieda lies back ready for a night of passion, but K. already has other things on his mind: 'wie ohnmächtig vor Liebe lag sie auf dem Rücken und breitete die Arme aus, die Zeit war wohl unendlich vor ihrer glücklichen Liebe [...] Dann schrak sie auf, da K. still in Gedanken blieb' (DS 68). K. eventually comes to, but his thoughts are elsewhere while his body rolls around in the beer puddles with her: 'Dort vergingen Stunden, Stunden gemeinsamen Atems, gemeinsamen Herzschlags, Stunden, in denen K. immerfort das Gefühl hatte, er verirre sich oder er sei soweit in der Fremde, wie vor ihm noch kein Mensch' (DS 68-69). The warning signs are there for K., as his preoccupation with future goals causes a fracture with present realities, leading inevitably to suffering. It is significant that his single-mindedness relating to his quest results in absent-mindedness in his relationships.

One of the key teachings of Buddhism with regard to enlightenment concerns the importance of mindfulness, in particular the need to be aware at all times of the intrinsic emptiness of all phenomena. This can only successfully be achieved by remaining in the moment and recognising it for what it is – a temporary step in time caused by a variety of factors, leading to a following step and so on. When we live in the present with our minds occupied elsewhere, this discord often results in discontent. K.'s frequent troubles with Frieda stem from this lack of mindfulness: she devotes herself to K. despite her past connection with the powerful Klamm, but K. goes through the romantic motions with her, his eye seemingly always drawn towards another target. During their first night together, K.'s whirlwind conquest of Frieda quickly turns sour when she responds to Klamm's summons by declaring that she is with the land surveyor. Frieda has cut her ties with the past and opened a new chapter in her life with K., but K. sees his notional ties to Klamm lying in tatters: 'Was war geschehn? Wo waren seine Hoffnungen? Was konnte er nun von Frieda erwarten, da alles verraten war?' (DS 69-70).

The opening scenes of the novel set the tone for K.'s 'wrong view' as his initial setbacks all stem from actions fuelled by the interests of the self, conditions which generate negative karmic energy. K. is absent during the moment he takes action because he is fixated instead on ulterior motives, and this kind of preoccupation can only lead to suffering. It is ironic that a potential solution to K.'s early claims can be found in the opening skirmish at the Bridge Inn when Schwarzer explains how life works in the village: 'Dieses Dorf ist Besitz des Schlosses, wer hier wohnt oder übernachtet, wohnt oder übernachtet gewissermaßen im Schloß' (DS 8). From a Buddhist point of view, the quest could end here, as K. is effectively already 'im Schloß': it is futile to press on 'unskillfully', since there can be no absolute assurances about the nature of our existence. K. has conducted his early business without

mindfulness, but in the next chapters he is presented with substantial accounts of Castle matters, and is allowed to reflect on his situation.

5.2.2 Castle law (reflection)

*It is not difficult to see the lack of reflection present in most people in society. Even to understand the workings of things on an elementary level, such as in seeing the cause and effect involved in personal actions, is beyond most people's awareness.*²³⁵

Thus K. has arrived in the village and thrown down the gauntlet to the Castle by announcing himself as the land surveyor. Permission to stay is granted by telephone, but this concession falls short of the official engagement K. desires. The second phase of his stay is marked by a series of information-gathering scenes, where further details are revealed about the ways of the Castle.

The first real direct communication from the authorities comes through Klamm's letter of welcome via Barnabas, and it includes the appointment of the 'Gehilfen'. Usually, anything received in writing from an authority can be considered definitive, but the letters K. receives are far from it. The Castle must be home to Zen masters because the messages are classic koans designed to confuse and unhinge, opening up a window into the truth of emptiness, by demonstrating the limits of reason. While an illocution uses language to deliver its message via a common acceptance of conventions to make a connection, a perlocution (ab)uses language to obscure the message and point up the untrustworthiness of conventions. For a Buddhist, acts of interpretation uncover emptiness because words, just like any other phenomena, have no inherent meaning. The letter-koans can thus be seen as 'helpful', in the manner of a Zen master tripping up his student to induce enlightenment.

²³⁵ Payutto, p. 69.

K. pores over his first letter from Klamm and finds that its message is not 'einheitlich': K. feels he is seen both as 'ein Freier' and as 'ein kleiner, vom Sitz jenes Vorstandes kaum bemerkbarer Arbeiter' (DS 41). His unease at being considered a lowly employee in the Castle hierarchy is confirmed later that evening in the *Herrenhof*, when he learns that Klamm is staying at the inn: 'besonders der Umstand, daß gerade sein Vorgesetzter hier war, verblüffte ihn; ohne daß er es sich selbst ganz erklären konnte, fühlte er sich Klamm gegenüber nicht so frei' (DS 57-58). K. is ostensibly after an official sanction of his position of surveyor, but the mere proximity to his superior results in a debilitating sense of awkwardness.²³⁶

K.'s demands for recognition are a 'fig leaf' to hide his real desire, which is for unconditional freedom: official 'Landvermesser' status would place K. in the Castle hierarchy and hence 'die gefürchteten Folgen des Untergeordnetseins, des Arbeiterseins' (DS 58) surface as concerns. His ambitions go beyond the work he could undertake as land surveyor and focus on the Castle: 'Nur als Dorfarbeiter, möglichst weit den Herren vom Schloß entrückt, war er imstande etwas im Schloß zu erreichen' (DS 42). This view is a clear sign that K. is more interested in the security of his existence than the nature of his duties. As a village worker, he could 'work', but K. is never seen doing any surveying and is focused on the 'Amt'. This is the crux of his suffering, for greater mindfulness relating to his life (work, actions) would create less suffering than the quest for appointment (title, name).

In true koan style, the letters from Klamm cause K. some anguish as their ambiguous messages sow doubt rather than certainty: 'die Briefe richtig zu beurteilen, ist ja unmöglich, sie wechseln selbst fortwährend ihren Wert' (DS 363). Koans can be read skillfully, by passing over the content, to

236 '[D]abei aber bedrückte es ihn schwer zu sehn, daß sich in solcher Bedenklichkeit offenbar schon die gefürchteten Folgen des Untergeordnetseins, des Arbeiterseins zeigten und daß er nicht einmal hier wo sie so deutlich auftraten, imstande war sie niederzukämpfen' (DS 58).

determine the underlying message and respond in kind. As such, a Buddhist reader might view Klammm's first letter as being perfectly acceptable and not at all misleading: it promises nothing more than K. can himself deliver. K. does not appreciate the 'Unentschlossenheit' that would accompany any discussion of how we spend our lives. He concludes instead that only two courses of action are open to him, thus preparing the way for his eventual abortive struggle. K. calculates that he can either accept the job as a village worker (and thereby enter into a 'scheinbarer Verbindung' with the Castle), or pursue the 'real' connection he craves through his messenger Barnabas. The advantage of the former is that he will soon establish himself among the villagers and as a 'local' avoid the official red tape. The disadvantage is the status of 'Arbeitersein' and all its attendant responsibilities: 'Dienst, Vorgesetzter, Arbeit, Lohnbedingungen, Rechenschaft' (DS 42). K., through his ignorance and delusions of self, gets the worst of both worlds, as it becomes clear he will not accept an 'apparent' link with the Castle, nor simple 'worker status', nor does he expect 'Gnade' from the 'Herren' above.

It is K.'s instinct to look for 'etwas Persönlicheres' in the communication, as he is driven by self-interest. Despite the disappointments in the letter, K. clings to it as a tangible link to the Castle and hangs it on a nail in his room, a fitting sign of his attachment to it.²³⁷

After K.'s wooing of Frieda, he encounters three more sources of Castle intelligence, through Gardena (about Klammm), the mayor (about the land surveyor's theoretical position) and the teacher (about the land surveyor's actual position). There are koan-like elements to all three exchanges, which have the effect of unsettling K. and giving him cause for reflection – the standard objective of a skillful koan.

237 Marjanne E. Goozé suggests that K. 'canonizes' the message by hanging it up, giving it a position of authority, in 'Texts, Textuality, and Silence in Franz Kafka's *The Castle*', in Harold Bloom, ed., *Franz Kafka's The Castle* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), p. 126.

In the first instance, K. has little time to enjoy his success with Frieda before he is faced with the protective instincts of her guardian, Gardena. K.'s moment of rapture with Frieda is soon followed by pangs of doubt as he fears losing a connection with Klamm. With Gardena, we see another perspective on K.'s objectives as she elevates Klamm to a high, unattainable status and relegates K. to the lowest of the low, 'Adler' and 'Blindschleiche' respectively (DS 90). K. holds his own in the discussion with Gardena, however, proving a match for her in a way that Josef K. was not, when faced with the arguments presented by Huld and Titorelli. Nevertheless, his ability to counter Gardena's objections owes much to a rational assessment of a situation which is clearly irrational. Gardena considers K. an outsider 'der überzählig und überall im Weg ist' (DS 80) and follows her blunt judgment with an account of Klamm's relationship with Frieda that could come from a Zen master's textbook on how to baffle. She explains that Klamm is a distant, inscrutable figure who will never be able to hold any meaningful dialogue with lesser mortals such as K. Her example is a koan masterpiece as she claims that it does not even follow that if Klamm calls Frieda's name he actually wants her to come to him.²³⁸ Gardena's remark prefigures the disappointment K. will shortly hear from the mayor about Klamm's letter – it is meaningful, but not in the way K. would have it.

This early koan about Klamm's inscrutability goes over K.'s head for he simply accepts his own 'insignificance' and, rather than be daunted by the disparity in their status, welcomes the challenge of meeting Klamm: fail or succeed, he would claim a special kind of victory 'frei vor einem Mächtigen gesprochen zu haben' (DS 82). At the end of the conversation with Gardena, to whose every objection K. has a rational answer, K. willingly adopts the role of

238 'Und daß er Frieda manchmal rief, muß gar nicht die Bedeutung haben, die man dem gern zusprechen möchte, er rief einfach den Namen Frieda – wer kennt seine Absichten? – daß Frieda natürlich eilends kam war ihre Sache' (DS 81).

‘der Unwissendste’ because it enables him to dare and not be held back: ‘dem Unwissenden scheint alles möglich’ (DS 91). Such a comment appears to reflect much Western thinking, which would encourage the accumulation of knowledge because any increase in it is arguably always positive. The Buddhist view differs in that the motivation must be determined first: K.’s tactical exploitation of his lack of awareness cannot be considered skillful, because he turns his ignorance into an object, like a badge of honour to proclaim his courage, or like a battering ram to break down the Castle’s doors.

K. also spots a logical flaw in Gardena’s argument against meeting Klamm – if it is supremely unlikely that the official will agree to see the land surveyor, why should she be concerned to block K.? Where K. goes wrong in Buddhist terms is his use of conventional logic, for none of his responses get through to Gardena; this coincides with the function of the koan, namely to encourage the individual to dispense with reason.

K. sets off for his meeting with the mayor encouraged by his capture of Frieda and his deft verbal sparring with Gardena. He is in a bullish mood and we gain some indication of how seriously he takes the battle with the Castle and the fight for his ‘self’: ‘K. [kämpfte] für etwas lebendigst Nahes, für sich selbst’ (DS 92-93). But Gardena’s subtle koan about Klamm that failed to trip him up is followed by more intense instances in the discussion about his status as ‘Landvermesser’.

Although the officials have been quite obliging towards him so far, K. remains cautious: ‘K. war, wenn er manchmal nur an diese Dinge dachte, nicht weit davon entfernt, seine Lage zufriedenstellend zu finden, trotzdem er sich immer nach solchen Anfällen des Behagens schnell sagte, daß gerade darin die Gefahr lag’ (DS 92). The existence unfolding before him appears to be one where ‘Amt’ and ‘Leben’ are intertwined, but K. wants nothing of an ‘außeramtliche, völlig unübersichtliche, trübe, fremdartige Leben’ (DS 93).

Official sanction is crucial for K. and to that end he needs to keep looking over his shoulder, 'ein Herumblicken nach allen Seiten vor jedem Schritt' (DS 94).

Before the meeting, K. reads Klamm's letter again and basks in its seemingly comforting message: 'Wieder hatte er das Gefühl der außerordentlichen Leichtigkeit des Verkehrs mit den Behörden' (DS 94-95). He reflects on how easy it has been to deal with the authorities: 'Sie trugen förmlich jede Last, alles konnte man ihnen auferlegen und selbst blieb man unberührt und frei' (DS 95). It is not necessary to see deception in the letter or naivety in K., if he feels a sense of ease. With permission to stay in the village, a job, lodgings and a fiancée, his circumstances are not desperate and the Castle seems prepared to take the strain and allow him a life of convenience. The problem comes when K. starts to think too much (as suggested at the beginning of chapter one by Zen master Seung Sahn). He quibbles with the mayor over the terms of Klamm's letter and his fixations gradually lead him astray.

As the novel unfolds, K. is regularly tripped up by appearances and assumptions, and the mayor deals the first serious blow to K.'s progress by undermining the source of his confidence. Klamm's letter is deemed to be a 'Privatbrief', of undoubted significance, but not in the sense that K. would wish: 'Ein Privatbrief Klamms hat natürlich viel mehr Bedeutung als eine amtliche Zuschrift, nur gerade die Bedeutung die *Sie* ihm beilegen hat er nicht' (DS 115). Rather than confirm his rightful appointment, the letter merely serves to place onto K. the burden of proof: 'Sie sind nur aufgenommen "wie Sie wissen", d. h. die Beweislast dafür daß Sie aufgenommen sind, ist Ihnen auferlegt' (DS 114).

The key perlocution in the letter-koan and main cause of suffering for K. is the phrase 'wie Sie wissen'. This phrase effectively means that K.'s status rests on the extent of what he knows, but K.'s insecurities regarding his

standing and his lack of familiarity with the Castle leave him open to severe doubts. Those three words come to haunt K. as he struggles to establish 'knowledge' of the Castle and its practices. If he took the 'as you know' in a relative and not an absolute sense, he would not suffer so much. If he had insight into the nature of existence and knew that no guarantees were available, he would take the 'wie Sie wissen' in its makeshift sense: as far as can be established, the position of land surveyor is yours. But K. wants 'cast-iron' assurances, known and recognised by the world, not just by himself. It is not enough to take on the job as it is and work day-to-day. K. wants indisputable recognition that goes beyond what he himself might think: in other words, it is not enough that K. alone believes he is the land surveyor. Once K. leaves the (already) shifting confines of his self, and ventures out into the external world looking for assurances, he is condemned.

The words 'wie Sie wissen' disturb K.'s conscience because he does not in fact 'know' that he is the land surveyor – he has just assumed it, or aspires to it. There is no certainty of knowledge and the Castle cannot come to his aid in this respect either. The phrase represents a classic koan challenge, striking at the heart of what we feel we can rely on: if we do not know something, does that mean it is not true? Or must something be known, for it to be true? K. sinks to his lowest ebb here, in contrast with his highest point when he meets Bürgel and turns his back on dependency on knowledge.

K.'s main link to the Castle turns to dust and all other references to the land surveyor appear to be just isolated, insignificant strands in a suffocating, bewildering bureaucracy. A chastened, demoralised K. dismisses the prospect of future interviews with the authorities as they work to consider his claims: 'ich will keine Gnadengeschenke vom Schloß, sondern mein Recht' (DS 119).

The extent of K.'s delusions regarding what sort of recognition he can expect to gain from the Castle becomes clear during this scene. K. is not

impressed with the description of the myriad departments and offices of the Castle and insists on hearing 'ein Wort über mich' (DS 105), that is, how *he* in particular relates to the whole, as if there is necessarily a guaranteed place for him in the hierarchy: 'Nur glaube ich daß hier zweierlei unterschieden werden müsse, nämlich erstens das was innerhalb der Ämter vorgeht und was dann wieder amtlich so oder so aufgefaßt werden kann, und zweitens meine wirkliche Person, ich, der ich außerhalb der Ämter stehe' (DS 105).

The mayor cannot be sure whether K. will get what he wants from the Castle – 'manches spricht dafür, manches dagegen' (DS 110) – and this ambiguous assessment infuriates K. to the point where he suggests taking matters into his own hands. Understandably, like anybody fiercely protecting a vulnerable ego, K. is sensitive to any attack on his self: 'Ich werde mich für meine Person dagegen zu wehren wissen' (DS 112). K. is clearly labouring under the illusion that the Castle officials are treating him badly and offending against what he deems to be wholly legitimate claims: '[ich verstehe,] daß hier ein entsetzlicher Mißbrauch mit mir, vielleicht sogar mit den Gesetzen getrieben wird' (DS 112). K. seems to be appealing to a higher authority ('Gesetze'), according to which K. is entitled to claim his existential rights. The longer the meeting goes on, the more frustrated K. gets and he descends to the 'Why me?' lament which accompanies all personalised human suffering that seems undeserved.

Despite several attempts at getting to grips with the Castle and its personnel and practices, K. invariably ends up with a false impression. The 'true' picture (or the realisation that there is none) remains frustratingly out of reach, and he labours instead under illusions. This meeting with the mayor gives K. his first real taste of what he is facing, as he takes on the Castle behemoth and its bewildering tangle of 'Behörde' and 'Kontrollbehörde'. K. is initially undeterred by the description of bureaucratic chaos that appears to

cast doubt on his 'calling' as land surveyor: 'Es unterhält mich nur dadurch [...] daß ich einen Einblick in das lächerliche Gewirre bekomme, welches unter Umständen über die Existenz eines Menschen entscheidet' (DS 102). K. thinks he understands, but his 'wrong view' is at the heart of his troubles for he assumes that it is 'das Gewirre' which decides the fate of man. In a Buddhist sense, his error is to see an external force in control over our lives, be it 'das Gewirre' or 'das Schloß', not to mention the false underlying assumption that there is something permanently meaningful about our existence.

Ignorance is considered in Buddhism to be the major obstacle to dealing with the problem of suffering: if we cannot see the 'truth' of the Dharma, we will be slave forever to our cravings. K.'s attempts to gain knowledge are repeatedly thwarted as he encounters shifting images, misleading communications and confusing descriptions. K. is made to feel uncertain about everything as it seems that every statement uttered is soon qualified, modified or retracted. For example, K. is disabused of the notion that the Castle is capable of making what appears to the untrained eye to be a mistake: 'Fehler kommen ja nicht vor und selbst wenn einmal ein Fehler vorkommt, wie in Ihrem Fall, wer darf denn endgiltig sagen, daß es ein Fehler ist' (DS 104). The Judaeo-Christian believer might equate this view to faith in an all-powerful God, whereas a Buddhist might suggest that mistakes are human or 'personal': nature is just nature and cannot be anything but what it is.

The discussion with the mayor sets the benchmark for K.'s futile struggle against the Castle for it marks K.'s passage from early (over)confidence – the meeting initially gave him 'wenig Sorgen' – to defensive paranoia. When he confuses the inscrutability of officialdom for hostility, the mayor corrects him: 'Niemand hält Sie hier zurück, aber das ist doch noch kein Hinauswurf' (DS 118).

This pivotal meeting shreds every ‘fact’ about the Castle K. has clung to hitherto. K. hears about the mountains of paperwork generated by his case and regrets the trouble he has caused: ‘mein Ehrgeiz geht nicht dahin, große mich betreffende Aktensäulen entstehen und zusammenkrachen zu lassen, sondern als kleiner Landvermesser bei einem kleinen Zeichentisch ruhig zu arbeiten’ (DS 107). The mayor’s response is crushing: ‘wenn es auf den Umfang der Arbeit ankäme, wäre Ihr Fall einer der geringsten’ (DS 107). This is echoed at the end of the novel when K. witnesses the disposal of a single document and imagines it could be his – a small note, rather than a bulging case file.

K. refers to the telephone call on his first evening in the village, which appeared to confirm his appointment, but this ‘information’ too is undermined: ‘Sie sind eben noch niemals wirklich mit unsern Behörden in Berührung gekommen. Alle diese Berührungen sind nur scheinbar, Sie aber halten sie infolge Ihrer Unkenntnis der Verhältnisse für wirklich’ (DS 115). The mayor castigates K. for his facile belief that one could just pick up the phone and speak directly to the relevant official in the Castle and have one’s query settled instantly: ‘Ich begreife auch nicht, wie selbst ein Fremder glauben kann, daß wenn er z. B. Sordini anruft, es auch wirklich Sordini ist, der ihm antwortet’ (DS 116-117). K. tries to maintain his poise by claiming that he did not put much faith in such telephone conversations, but even here the rug is pulled from under his feet as the mayor upbraids him for this view, too: ‘wirkliche Bedeutung kommt diesen telephonischen Antworten durchaus zu, wie denn nicht?’ (DS 117).²³⁹ To confuse K. further, the mayor goes on to ‘clarify’ what information emanating from the Castle can ‘mean’: ‘Alle diese

239 This no-win case has Zen parallels: ‘Zen master Shousan used to hold up a stick and say, “If you call it a stick, you are clinging. If you do not call it a stick, you are ignoring. So what do you call it?”’ From *Zen and the Art of Insight* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), translated by Thomas Cleary, p. 9.

Äußerungen haben keine amtliche Bedeutung; wenn Sie ihnen amtliche Bedeutung zuschreiben, gehen Sie in die Irre, dagegen ist ihre private Bedeutung im freundschaftlichen oder feindseligen Sinne sehr groß, meist größer als eine amtliche Bedeutung jemals sein könnte' (DS 117).

It seems that whatever opinion K. holds on the Castle, it is turned inside out until he has nothing tangible left to cling to: 'Sie haben darin recht, daß man die Äußerungen des Schlosses nicht wortwörtlich hinnehmen darf' (DS 118). Such an explanation could also pass as a description of a koan, and the leader of the village community grows into a Zen master figure with every passing comment that serves to undermine K.'s assumptions. This scene offers a narrative version of Kafka's first aphorism, as the tightrope K. tries to walk from the village into the Castle is booby-trapped with a succession of tripwires designed to throw him off balance. A similarly bed-ridden Huld achieved a comparable effect in *Der Proceß* when he mesmerised Josef K. with his tales of the Court.

The mayor has sought to tell K. how insubstantial his case is, ranking among the 'winzigste Kleinigkeiten' (DS 96), but this comment only serves to reinforce K.'s resolve. He ends the meeting in defiant mood, effectively rejecting further progress along bureaucratic channels, in favour of direct action. Fittingly, Klammer's letter, which began the meeting as K.'s letter of appointment, ends it in rather devalued form as an ambiguous 'Privatbrief', folded into a 'Schiffchen' by the mayor's wife.

This humiliating close marks the end of the reflective period. K. leaves the mayor shaken by the lack of progress made and rejects the olive branch of further meetings. He returns to the inn to find Gardena severely incapacitated, as the earlier discussion with K. about Klammer has dredged up old memories of her younger days, when she enjoyed the official's 'favour'. Her exaggerated devotion to Klammer offers an extreme example of the pointlessness of

attachment, and holds up a mirror to K. in which he might recognise his own fixation. Gardena clings to three 'Andenken' (a picture, a cloth and a bonnet) as if they contained the Holy Ghost, in a parody of nostalgia and vanity.²⁴⁰ It transpires that these mementoes were not even given to Gardena, but they were all she could grasp hold of ('mit zwanzig Händen', perhaps) before losing her place as Klammer's serving girl. This episode has a perlocutionary effect in the way the three Klammer souvenirs follow so soon after K.'s attachment to Klammer's letter, which he had previously hung on a nail in his room as a reminder of his goal. Its new incarnation as a folded paper boat, combined with Gardena's laughable 'relics', spell out the dangers of clinging to symbols.

The third part in the series of reflective episodes comes when K. leaves Gardena to go to his room and finds the schoolteacher there. Although K. has only recently finished his discussions with the mayor, the teacher already knows all the details and has come to inform K. that the post of 'Schuldiener' is being offered. This news-travels-fast effect is repeated throughout the novel and takes on a perlocutionary effect of its own. It seems that wherever K. ventures in the village (and he is only there for a week) the locals always recognise him (and this is without the benefit of social networking aids). The effect on K. is that he has no time to reflect on the job offer, but rejects it out of hand, much to the delight of the teacher, who regards K. as a selfish, arrogant interloper. In his view, the authorities should not be expected to pay any particular attention to K.'s case: 'Wir sind nicht Ihre Schutzengel und haben keine Verpflichtung Ihnen auf allen Ihren Wegen nachzulaufen' (DS 144). This can be interpreted to mean that the Castle (world) can offer no guarantees in life. It falls to Frieda to talk K. into accepting the position for, while he was with the mayor, events had moved on and Gardena ordered K. to

240 It is difficult to subscribe to Patrick Bridgwater's suggestion that Gardena represents the 'voice of reason', in *Kafka's Novels: an Interpretation* (New York: Rodopi, 2003), p. 240.

leave the premises. It seems K. is as slow at hearing local news as the villagers are quick – K. has still not adjusted to ‘Castle Mean Time’ and is out of step with village life.

In a short time, K. has gathered a lot of information about the Castle, but failed to appreciate that the Castle is potentially a benign influence and not an adversary. He views the world in dualistic terms (them and us) despite an initial sense of comfort dealing with the authorities, before falling deeper into his obsession with his ‘rights’. In this respect, there are similarities between the Castle and the Court in *Der Proceß*: both organisations are perceived as supreme authorities with the power to govern people’s lives. From a Buddhist point of view, however, this governance rests on natural laws rather than any other kind of man-made ordering principles, be they ethical, spiritual, economic or otherwise. Just as we never see the Court’s judges or higher-level officials, so we never see the top echelons of power in the Castle, only the lower tier of bureaucrats who carry out orders according to natural laws. This is an important point because it defines the conflict in the novels between the main character and the overarching authority. The Court merely communicates to Josef K. the fact of his suffering through ignorance and attachment to selfhood – there is no punishment for this and he is free to continue in his ignorance should he wish. The Castle accepts K.’s self-appointment as land surveyor, but cannot sanction it officially. This lack of recognition is misinterpreted by K. as defiance, when it is communication of the truth of emptiness.

Consistent with a Judaeo-Christian outlook, K. seeks correlation between the natural order and his personal aspirations. But, as the schoolteacher makes clear, the Castle cannot be responsible for everything: it can only represent the impersonal (i.e. neutral) transience of phenomena, which may come across as ‘irrational’ to us as we seek to impose meaning on our

situations. In other words, messages emanating from the Castle will necessarily be 'koan-like' with perlocutionary effects, because the links between self, order and meaning are missing and will cause pain until the individual sees through the need for rationality.

As K. hits an interpretive brick wall, it is possible readers might suffer the same disorientating fate. The perlocutions that rile K. have elicited negative reactions from critics who see the textual ambiguities as inadequacies in the writing. Ronald Gray, for example, feels that Kafka is either 'withholding information' or 'putting down words which he is not concerned to back up'.²⁴¹ K. is exasperated by the Castle's inability or reluctance to speak unequivocally, and the reader is frustrated by the text's paradoxes and aporia. Eventually, K. learns to let go of his insistence on meaningful order and on synchronicity between the outside world and his inner being; similarly, the reader can relax his expectations of textual integrity.

The perlocutions directed at K. by the mayor bear comparison with the way in which Huld and Titorelli confound Josef K., and this need not be seen as evidence of a sinister conspiracy or poor writing. Gray excuses 'inconsequential ramblings' in the mouths of characters like Huld and Titorelli because it amounts to satire, but feels the increased prevalence in the later stages of *Das Schloß* suggest Kafka's writing was almost out of control, to the extent that this was perhaps why Kafka had asked for his work to be burned.²⁴² From a Buddhist point of view, the opposite holds true, because the increased volume of perlocutionary messages brings to a crescendo the discordant combination of rational expression in an irrational world.

241 Ronald Gray, p. 150. (The lack of back-up could also be intentional, a useful tool for Zen masters looking to dumbfound their students.)

242 Ibid., p. 157.

After this period of intensive listening (and some argument), K. leaps into direct action again and reasserts his challenge in a more aggressive manner.

5.2.3 Staking claims (action)

*Do work of all kinds with a mind that is void.*²⁴³

The third phase of K.'s stay in the village is marked by a much more desperate clutching at 'moorings', and there is little evidence of insight gained from information received. His next attempt on the authorities comes at the *Herrenhof* when he learns that Klamm is preparing to leave. In earlier discussions, K. had already spoken of his need to be free and this represents an instance where K. clings to a desire for freedom, but is left empty-handed as soon as he tries to assert a hold over it. K. discovers a sledge in the inn courtyard being prepared for Klamm's return to the Castle and decides to wait there for an impromptu meeting with the official. His very presence results in Klamm's departure being cancelled, however, and the sledge is put away. Although there is ostensibly nothing to be gained by remaining out in the snow alone, K. stubbornly stands his ground in the courtyard, attached to his hollow victory: 'es war ein Sieg, der keine Freude machte' (DS 168). His failure is described in terms of the emptiness of possession: 'Trotz allem was geschehen war hatte er das Gefühl, daß das was er bisher erreicht hatte eine Art Besitz war, den er zwar nur noch scheinbar festhielt aber doch nicht auf einen beliebigen Befehl hin ausliefern mußte' (DS 167). K. defiantly clings to his 'success' in blocking Klamm's departure, chalking up a Pyrrhic victory and practical defeat: 'Dann will ich ihn lieber beim Warten verfehlen' (DS 167). The reason that this freedom appears so paradoxically oppressive is that it is really the slavery of attachment to selfhood and its thirst for meaningfulness. Yet in claiming this hard-fought victory, K. senses the emptiness of a meaningless

243 Buddhadasa in Titmuss, p. 38.

possession: 'da schien es K. als habe man nun alle Verbindung mit ihm abgebrochen und als sei er nun freilich freier als jemals und [...] als gäbe es gleichzeitig nichts Sinnloseres, nichts Verzweifelteres als diese Freiheit, dieses Warten, diese Unverletzlichkeit' (DS 169). If anything, K. has created a kind of 'auto-koan' by baffling himself with his self-deluding behaviour.

Readers of both Judaeo-Christian and Buddhist persuasions could agree with the pointlessness of K.'s gesture, but for significantly different reasons. For the former, K. suffers because he has not reached Klammer and he is isolated – failure and exclusion. Politzer judges the sledge scene as 'one of the most paradoxical passages Kafka has ever written'.²⁴⁴ K.'s liberty and invulnerability lose meaning in a self-imposed exile because he stands alone and has no contact with other human standards. From the Zen angle, the scene highlights both K.'s stubbornness and the transience of satisfaction, both resulting in suffering; hence, The Three Universal Characteristics of impermanence, not-self and suffering are all represented in K.'s futile courtyard gesture.

After standing his ground for a while in his futile gesture of protest, K. returns to the inn and finds himself in an interview with Klammer's secretary, Momus, who is tasked with recording all the minutiae of village events in a register. K. has so far met with little joy from his dealings with the officials, so he refuses to participate and is about to walk out when Momus demands co-operation 'in Klammer's name'. Gardena has left her busy kitchen (and sickbed) to be present and urges K. to submit to the protocol as the one potential path to Klammer, but K. holds out little hope of success: 'Die Drohungen der Wirtin fürchtete K. nicht, der Hoffnungen, mit denen sie ihn zu fangen suchte, war er müde' (DS 183).

²⁴⁴ Politzer, p. 279.

The term 'müde' is often a sign that one of Kafka's characters is starting to experience a world-weariness that could lead to a breakthrough into enlightenment. This kind of tiredness is a fertile ground out of which rejection of unskillful attachments can be made. K. is not impressed with the prospects offered by Momus's protocol reaching Klammm, so he is minded to let it go. K.'s detachment is the correct choice for the wrong reason though, from a Buddhist point of view. He is right not to place any hope in such a forlorn method of contacting Klammm (on a par with staking out an empty sledge), but instead of deliberately eschewing all attempts to link up with the Castle he just searches for a better one. K.'s refusal to participate is still action, a statement of intent rather than a reflection of understanding. It should be recalled that, in Buddhism, all actions fuelled by ego carry karmic weight, so K.'s avoidance of the protocol contributes to bad karma.

This state of mental turbulence indicates how K. has been shaken to the point where he does not know what he wants. The Momus protocol, written in painstaking detail for Klammm who refuses to read it, is another Castle koan sent to give K. some insight into the non-sense of his quest.²⁴⁵ All the other villagers submit to it (witness the hush in the room when Momus introduces himself as Klammm's scribe), but this does not mean that they are right or wrong, or set any specific store by it. Gardena might be attached to the register, in the fervent belief that the minutes are indeed a 'Verbindung' with Klammm, but she also concedes Klammm's right not to bother reading it: 'Ist es denn nötig oder auch nur wünschenswert, daß Klammm dieses Protokoll liest und von den Nichtigkeiten Ihres Lebens wortwörtlich Kenntnis bekommt' (DS 182).

245 "Bleibt mir vom Leib mit Eueren Protokollen!" pflegt er zu sagen' (DS 182).

K. leaves the Momus hearing puzzled even as to whether he was right or wrong to resist Gardena's exhortations to comply: 'schließlich wußte man nicht ob man standgehalten oder nachgegeben hatte' (DS 186). His struggle has become pointless and for much of the novel the reader has to look on as K. stumbles from one useless initiative to another. The point here is that the 'meaning' invested in the protocol is derived from personal wishes (self) and hence K.'s tortured reaction to skipping the interview. His desire to reach Klamm is so strong and his options so few that he wonders whether he was justified in letting the opportunity go. In this respect, the koan has worked in creating doubt in K.'s mind, but a complete breakthrough has to wait until another official 'Verbindung' is offered (and refused) through Bürgel.

K.'s suffering increases in this middle part of the novel as his quest falters on a number of fronts, via Barnabas, Frieda, the 'Gehilfen' and his position as 'Schuldiener'. After rejecting the 'official' channel (Momus), he runs into Barnabas and takes receipt of Klamm's second letter. This message from the Castle raises K.'s hopes and then creates an immediate disappointment as the content bears no relation to what has been happening – it ironically describes Klamm's satisfaction at K.'s surveying activities. Reading like an impersonal 'circular' letter, it is crammed with platitudes and empty encouragement. K. interprets the text as misinformation and evidence of an authority which is pathetically out-of-touch, unconcerned, incompetent, or all three. This is taking the content at face value, when its underlying target could be to draw K.'s attention to the fact that he has not done any surveying and, perhaps more significantly, is essentially not mindful of or interested in his work. K. seeks to send a quick response through Barnabas, but he learns that his messenger has not even delivered the message K. entrusted to him when they first met. This pair of miscommunications can also be considered

as perlocutions, since the effect of the (non-)delivery makes the biggest impression on K.²⁴⁶

Barnabas compounds the sense of futility by doing the exact opposite to the Castle: the former has a meaningful message (remembered verbatim at K.'s dictation) but does not deliver it; the latter has a meaningless message, but it is safely delivered.

After two quick defeats from official quarters (Momus, Klammer's second letter), K. makes for the school where his bride is waiting, but his domestic situation offers no respite from suffering, either. The 'honeymoon' period is over by the first morning as the schoolchildren crowd into the classroom to discover the scenes of disorder created overnight by K. and his 'household'. When taken to task by the schoolteacher, K. tries to deflect blame on to his assistants, but they are saved by Frieda – K.'s footholds in the village grow ever weaker.

K. is never long without some shadows to chase, however, and since Frieda appears disloyal and Klammer as distant as a soaring eagle, he seizes on another lifeline. Detours and diversions seem to wrongfoot K. every step of the way and rather than treading mindfully along the path (or tightrope) with his eyes open, K. hurries along with his eyes fixed on an object located in his fantasies. He runs away with his dreams and they run away with him, as suggested by the new hope offered through Hans Brunswick's mother: 'wer weiß wohin er dadurch gelangen würde und in der Nähe der Frau würde er jedenfalls häufig sein – so spielte er mit den Träumen und sie mit ihm' (DS 235). These tenuous hopes show that K. is ready to sacrifice everything for this new delusion.²⁴⁷ From a Buddhist perspective, it is significant that these

246 K.'s dissatisfaction with Klammer's letter recalls how the address 'Zimmermaler' unsettled Josef K. (DP 61).

247 'Das Gespräch mit Hans hatte ihm neue, zugegebenermaßen unwahrscheinliche, völlig grundlose, aber nicht mehr zu vergessende Hoffnungen gemacht' (DS 240).

hopes are 'grundlos', and yet K. feels obliged to chase after them. This tends to support the picture of attachment-fuelled suffering, with K. in thrall to his Castle fixation, as he puts up with 'die Reihe der fortwährenden kleinen Leiden des Lebens' (DS 241) to reach his goal. Tellingly, we also learn how K.'s quest is not related to discovering peace: 'er war nicht hergekommen um ein Leben in Ehren und Frieden zu führen' (DS 241).

The trail through Hans's mother is not followed up by K., but this 'lead' proves significant in a negative way because it shows Frieda the extent of K.'s attachment to his Castle goals, and the consequent diminished interest in their love. K. is not aware that he has lost Frieda as he hurries off later to get news of Barnabas. At this point in the quest K. has opened up a number of fronts on which to attack the Castle, but none is bearing fruit.

5.2.4 Village law (reflection)

*After the Buddha was enlightened he was walking down the road in a very happy state [...] And he met some people and they said, 'You seem very special. What are you, are you some kind of an angel or a deva?' He seemed inhuman in some way. 'No.' 'Well, are you some kind of a god then?' 'No.' 'Well, then are you some kind of a wizard or magician?' 'No,' he replied. 'Well, are you a man?' 'No,' he said. 'Then what are you?' And he answered, 'I am awake.'*²⁴⁸

K.'s direct actions in the middle part of the novel do not result in any success, and these failures precede another period in which he mostly gathers information by listening to the villagers. He spends the first morning in the school (after the early humiliation) trying to mend fences with the schoolteacher by working hard – that is, focusing on the jobs in hand (clearing snow, making repairs) rather than on his quest. It is perhaps not by accident that K. cuts a relatively serene figure while occupied with his caretaker duties,

²⁴⁸ Jack Kornfield, *The Eightfold Path for the Householder* (DharmaNet edition, 1995), p. 1.

for it foreshadows the post-Bürger incarnation of K., who is equally serene once the all-consuming quest has been set aside.

Before the great transformation can take place, however, K. still has a lot to learn and the next phase in his stay is marked by tales-within-a-tale. The stories of Barnabas, Olga, Amalia and their father are all presented in varying degrees of detail, without reference to K.'s predicament, but purely on their own personal terms. The parents and children are shunned by the rest of the community, but used to enjoy high standing, and their unexpected, controversial fall from favour allows parallels to be drawn with K.'s lowly status and problematic relationship with the Castle. Through observation and instruction, by illocution and perlocution, village life unfolds before K.'s eyes and affords him insight into how his own situation might develop under the Castle, depending on the choices made.

Amalia has experienced 'real' suffering in that her rejection of Sortini's advances has caused ostracism from the community. However, she stands firm on a point of principle based on conventional moral laws (insulted by a lewd proposition), and she never complains about her fate. K., in contrast, defends an absolute principle (his right to exist as official land surveyor) that has no basis in any kind of law, moral, existential or otherwise, and he makes a big fuss about it too. K. yearns for attachment to the Castle, whereas Amalia longs for freedom from society, 'ein fortwährendes, jedem andern Gefühl überlegenes Verlangen nach Einsamkeit' (DS 264).

Amalia is an enigmatic figure at the centre of the conflict with the Castle, but on the periphery of the action. Her situation invites different reactions, but whether she is seen as independent or an outcast, it is her isolation that garners attention. Franz Kuna believes that Amalia is 'Kafka's only truly absurdist character' as she resists the 'influence of outside powers' in a 'heroic

protest against an alien order'.²⁴⁹ Her defiance might even show great resolve and principle, and Politzer feels Kafka granted Amalia what he denied his main heroes, namely 'the ability to survive, and even transcend, despair'.²⁵⁰

Amalia and her family suffer the consequences as she refuses dialogue and shuts herself off from society, but this stubbornness is not the stuff of heroines. She could be seen as a selfish character who allows her anger to dominate her thinking. The resultant stubborn pride is an apposite example of karma at work – selfish actions give rise to suffering. Although there is courage in her rejection of Sortini, her withdrawal still counts as attachment or fixation because her life is defined by the exclusion. For Goozé, Amalia's problem is that 'she refuses to interpret at all', though it could be argued that even 'no interpretation' is a kind of interpretation.²⁵¹ Karoline Krauss believes that Amalia detaches herself from the Castle, but fails to create a new 'discourse' and remains socially 'mute'.²⁵² Thus, her detachment in Buddhist terms is nothing more than self-isolation, a heightened sense of self-worth rather than an enlightened position. K. ultimately chooses a different kind of withdrawal in Bürgel's room because his non-engagement is a release from the authorities in a way that Amalia's never can be. Her self continues to be defined by its antagonism towards the Castle; K.'s self hangs free.

Amalia's story opens a long account relating to the misfortune afflicting the family. It is a rich source of conflicting information about the Castle and, judging by his few interjections, K. listens spellbound while Olga talks at length about the Castle, without ever revealing a single definitive, authoritative fact, for everything she says comes with an eventual disclaimer. K. becomes engrossed in the story of how her family is ostracised by the community and

249 Kuna, p. 177.

250 Politzer, p. 270.

251 Goozé, p. 134.

252 Karoline Krauss, *Kafka's K. versus the Castle* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), p. 94.

apparently (though not ‘officially’) punished for Amalia’s dismissive treatment of Sortini. He hears how Olga’s father resorts to increasingly pathetic means to attract the attention of the authorities and how he begins to wilt under the impossible strain of securing from the Castle an official pardon for an ‘unofficial’ incident.

The first person under the microscope, however, is Barnabas and his ‘scheinbarer Dienst’ as messenger. At one point, Olga seemingly transports K. inside the Castle walls on Barnabas’s coat tails, only then to undermine her own claims: ‘gewiß, er geht in die Kanzleien, aber sind die Kanzleien das eigentliche Schloß?’ (DS 275). The question may be rhetorical, but it sets the tone for a long night of reflection for K.

The role of Barnabas as a Castle employee is unclear, even to himself, so the word he brings from the authorities cannot be considered illocutionary, in terms of direct, uncomplicated information. His presence can be taken at perlocutionary value, however, as it is his existence on the margins of Castle life that draws attention to what is missing. Politzer reads Barnabas as a ‘messenger of hope’, but Klammer’s ambiguous letters, the undelivered messages and his unconfirmed status undermine this view.²⁵³ Barnabas becomes a ‘walking koan’, a living embodiment of the delusions we cling to in order to give our lives a semblance of direction and substance.

Olga describes the uncertainty surrounding the clothes Barnabas wears, which are supposed to indicate his work status. He does not have any ‘Amtsleid’, like certain other senior Castle attendants, but such knowledge is not completely encouraging: ‘das ist ein gewisser Trost, könnte man von vorherein meinen, aber er ist trügerisch, denn ist Barnabas ein höherer Diener?’ (DS 274). Olga’s account raises more questions than it answers and

²⁵³ Politzer, p. 265.

her ability to tie K. in knots continues as he listens approvingly to how she has attempted to encourage Barnabas in his role as messenger in the face of mounting doubts. Predictably, she then rejects his praise as being misplaced:

[E]s täuscht Dich, und so täusche ich vielleicht auch ihn. Was hat er denn erreicht? In eine Kanzlei darf er eintreten, aber es scheint nicht einmal eine Kanzlei, eher ein Vorzimmer der Kanzleien, vielleicht nicht einmal das, vielleicht ein Zimmer, wo alle zurückgehalten werden sollen, die nicht in die wirklichen Kanzleien dürfen. Mit Klamm spricht er, aber ist es Klamm? (DS 285-286)

These comments offer a particularly rich vein of koans as Olga pours doubt on every phenomenon that the senses settle on – in the end we can be sure of nothing. The perlocutionary aspects to the mixed messages and signals that plague Barnabas's job are distilled into Olga's use of the words 'es täuscht Dich', which recall the chaplain's last-ditch efforts to open Josef K.'s eyes with the parable *Vor dem Gesetz*.

In a koan which could stand as a masterpiece on the subject of transience, Olga delivers a stunning account of how Klamm seems to metamorphose virtually at will. Its perlocutionary effect is shown in K.'s reaction (he is 'betroffen') – another tripwire to jolt him out of his delusions. The description of Klamm would not be out of place if uttered by a Zen master trying to shatter the idea of a fixed image of selfhood, subject to the passing of time and gradual, if imperceptible, changes:²⁵⁴

Er soll ganz anders aussehen, wenn er ins Dorf kommt und anders wenn er es verläßt, anders ehe er Bier getrunken hat, anders nachher, anders im Wachen, anders im Schlafen, anders allein, anders im Gespräch und, was hienach verständlich ist, fast grundverschieden oben im Schloß. (DS 278)

254 Politzer draws attention to comments Kafka made in the Blue Octavo Notebooks: 'Das entscheidend Charakteristische dieser Welt ist ihre Vergänglichkeit' (p. 256).

Klamm may barely have a walk-on part in the novel, in that he is only spied sitting in a bar and walking to a sledge, but otherwise he occupies the thoughts of the whole village. His name triggers hushed silences and his followers cling to souvenirs stolen from his presence. The fact that K.'s case is assigned to Klamm could be seen as another perlocutionary act by the Castle, because of the impossibility of making contact with him. K. fails to reach him at the *Herrenhof*, but his inability to pin down a man whose appearance seems to change by the second is not surprising.

The name Klamm has different associations in German which can be used to support a range of interpretations. In the sense of 'numb', it suggests a lack of feeling, perhaps indicating that K. needs to take things less personally and seriously (which is a mission we later learn was entrusted to his assistants). It also evokes the sense of 'delusion', which could tell a Western reader that K. will find that life is meaningless, or reveals to a Buddhist reader that K. is misguided in his quest for meaning.²⁵⁵ This allows for ambiguities in the text: does Klamm signify that K. can only find the meaning of existence 'within himself', or that life has 'no meaning whatsoever'. The Buddhist position sits somewhere between these two poles in that life has meaning everywhere inside and outside, but none of it is fixed and reliable, and that is where our problem may lie – in our attitude towards it.

That K. has failed to learn anything from the meeting with the mayor is proved as his conversation with Olga develops. She casts doubt on the significance of any letters that the Castle might entrust to the young, inexperienced, uninitiated Barnabas, but K. dismisses any downgrading of his letters from Klamm. He clings to the one favourable interpretation bestowed on them, namely their worth as a 'Privatbrief': 'zwar nur eine private und wenig

255 Bridgwater connects Klamm with the Czech 'klam' meaning 'delusion'. Bridgwater, *Kafka's Novels*, pp. 228-29.

durchsichtige, aber doch eine große Bedeutung' (DS 290). Impressed and relieved, Olga believes such faith in the letters would encourage Barnabas in his job but, barely moments after defending the worthless messages, K. launches into a highly ironic piece of advice for her under the circumstances, remarking that Olga needs to open her brother's eyes, not pat him on the back: 'Du kannst jemanden, der die Augen verbunden hat noch so sehr aufmuntern, durch das Tuch zu starren, er wird doch niemals etwas sehn; erst wenn man ihm das Tuch abnimmt, kann er sehn' (DS 291). Alternatively, seen in retrospect, this conversation with Olga could mark the point at which K. starts to open his own eyes.²⁵⁶

At one point Amalia returns and relates the cautionary tale of a young man obsessed with the Castle: 'ich hörte einmal von einem jungen Mann, der beschäftigte sich mit den Gedanken an das Schloß bei Tag und Nacht, alles andere vernachlässigte er, man fürchtete für seinen Alltagsverstand, weil sein ganzer Verstand oben im Schloß war' (DS 323-324). Olga wonders who Amalia is referring to, but K. suddenly interrupts her speculation. His interjection of 'Laß die Deutungen!' (DS 324) could have been uttered by the chaplain to Josef K. Amalia may have touched a nerve, and this indicates perhaps that K. is beginning to understand how a reliance on meaningfulness is an ill-advised way to lead one's life. Different interpretations abound and we are free to take them or leave them as we please, but fixing ties to them is a path to suffering.

Despite the warning about a potential loss of 'Alltagsverstand', K. cannot help drawing similarities between the family's plight and his, as he grasps for a clearer definition of his existence in the village:

In der Erzählung Olgas eröffnete sich ihm eine so große fast unglaubliche Welt, daß er es sich nicht versagen konnte mit seinem

256 This recalls the point of no return that features in Kafka's Aphorism 5: 'Von einem gewissen Punkt an gibt es keine Rückkehr mehr. Dieser Punkt ist zu erreichen' (NSF2 114).

kleinen Erlebnis an sie zu rühren, um sich ebenso von ihrem Dasein, als auch von dem eigenen deutlicher zu überzeugen. (DS 341)

The story of Amalia's rejection of Sortini's advances offers a parallel to K.'s predicament. Olga explains how there was no official complaint about Amalia's angry treatment of Sortini's messenger, and therefore there was no reason for an official pardon. Popular opinion in the village condemned Amalia and the family suffered as a consequence, but there was no word on the matter from the authorities. This is like the 'wie Sie wissen' of Klamm's private letter to K., as it could be argued that the family makes matters worse by dwelling on the incident. Indeed, Olga suggests at one point that all they would have to do is ride out the storm, show a little remorse and eventually their former status would be regained. But Olga's father is obsessed with obtaining an official pardon, so the family embarks on a series of ever more desperate methods of attracting the Castle's attention. Just as K. has found out to his own cost, they then find themselves living in a world of 'Schein'. One plan is to seek reconciliation with the offended messenger,²⁵⁷ but given that the problem is 'scheinbar', the solution will be of a similar nature: 'Das alles konnte ja keine entscheidende Bedeutung haben, war nur Schein' (DS 346). The palpable dissatisfaction with these achievements recall Josef K.'s disappointment with Titorelli's explanation of 'scheinbare Freisprechung'.

The tale of Olga's father and his attempts to get the attentions of the Castle bring little respite for K. Olga's father was unable to establish any official condemnation of his family, and hence he had no chance of extracting a pardon. He ends up appealing to individual officials, but Olga explains how such a mechanism does not exist: 'Wenn der Vater an einen zuständigen Beamten geraten wäre, so kann doch dieser ohne Vorakten nichts erledigen

257 '[W]enn die allgemeine Meinung, sei es auch nur scheinbar, nur von der Botenbeleidigung weiß, ließe sich, sei es auch wieder nur scheinbar, alles wiedergutmachen, wenn man den Boten versöhnen könnte' (DS 346).

und insbesondere nicht auf der Landstraße, er kann eben nicht verzeihen, sondern nur amtlich erledigen' (DS 340). The father tries to stop officials in passing cars, but can never work out when they will go by or which road they will take: 'jeden Augenblick besteht die Möglichkeit einer Änderung' (DS 342), which sounds like the universal characteristic of impermanence.²⁵⁸

In a different plan to her father's, Olga ingratiate herself with the Castle attendants, in a bid to get inside the Castle. She achieves 'eine gewisse Verbindung', but of course in true koan style, 'eine grosse Verbindung ist es nicht' (DS 350). On the other hand, she learns how it might be possible to bypass the otherwise inordinately long process of getting officially hired to work in the Castle. But then again, any position gained in such a way has its drawbacks: 'man ist dann zwar nicht öffentlicher Angestellter, sondern nur ein heimlich und halb Zugelassener, man hat weder Rechte noch Pflichten' (DS 351). Another scheme is to try and get Barnabas, the youngest and most innocent (untainted) family member into the Castle, in a bid to clear their name. However, 'jener scheinbare Dienst' has since yielded just the letters he got for K.

The vain hopes driving K. forward sound uncannily like the deluded expectations described by Olga, relating to the impossible task of gaining official employment from the Castle. However forlorn, such hopes keep the job seeker alive, although in the end this life turns out to be futile: 'er hofft aber doch, wie könnte er sonst leben, aber nach vielen Jahren, vielleicht als Greis erfährt er die Ablehnung, erfährt daß alles verloren ist und sein Leben vergeblich war' (DS 352). This long, drawn-out suffering echoes the 'Verschleppung' described by Titorelli, as well as an ending that Kafka had

258 Bridgwater draws useful parallels between Olga's father and the man from the country from the parable *Vor dem Gesetz*: both men descend into increasingly ridiculous ways to open a dialogue with the respective law-givers. Bridgwater, *Kafka's Novels*, p. 323.

once envisaged for K., but it is significant that K. achieves a more effective 'wirkliche Freisprechung' by dint of his decision to let go.

Olga's tale of her family's plight contains many references to existence under the Castle and how nobody can expect special treatment. The Castle, as supreme power, is of course responsible for everything, but not in the sense that it will intervene in the daily troubles of any of its individual subjects on demand, so no chance of succour lies there for Olga's father when his business slumps after the Sortini scandal. The following explanation from Olga sounds remarkably Buddhist in that it appears to sever any direct link between the individual and an overarching authority:

[S]ollte sich denn das Schloß um alles kümmern? Es kümmerte sich ja in Wirklichkeit um alles, aber es konnte doch nicht grob eingreifen in die Entwicklung, einfach und zu keinem andern Zweck, als dem Interesse eines einzelnen Mannes zu dienen. (DS 335)

This recalls the teacher's warning that the Castle cannot be held accountable for looking after K. The Castle does not get involved in direct action, and is an authority only in the nominal sense, with no judicial or punitive powers. The punishment is inflicted by the family on itself, in much the same way that Josef K. torments himself by his reaction to the arrest, and this illustrates the way in which an unenlightened individual 'takes ownership' of suffering.²⁵⁹ The Barnabas family's suffering is real – just as all Kafka's figures 'really' suffer – but its perception as punishment is 'imagined' because they have assumed a causal link between the Castle and Amalia's dispute with Sortini. In other words, for suffering to cease, its 'ownership' must cease, and this point is the subject of The Third Noble Truth. The Castle, like any other authority or power conceived in a Judaeo-Christian framework, has to be benign or malign, and the individual will then interpret communications

259 Krauss talks of the 'imaginary punishment' the Barnabas family acts out (p. 27).

accordingly. If the Buddhist line is adopted, the Castle is neither supportive of nor hostile towards its village subjects, but is simply indicative of the impartial, impersonal ‘truth’ of anicca – all beings fall under the natural law of impermanence.

The Castle and Court do not underwrite laws; they reflect the impermanence, not-self and suffering that hold sway across the universe. Just as the Buddha was essentially a teacher or guide who knew the truth, the authorities are enlightened and know what will lead to suffering and what will lead to release from suffering. Because the Castle knows how the world works does not mean it controls how it works, but to the untrained eye it can appear to hold this power.

In reality, the Castle cannot appoint K. or pardon the Barnabas family, just as the Court cannot exonerate Josef K. The lifestyle options set before Josef K. of ‘wirkliche Freisprechung’, ‘scheinbare Freisprechung’ and ‘Verschleppung’ are just everyday approaches to existence (reflecting insight, misguided ignorance and willful ignorance). The same options are picked up in *Das Schloß*, where the paths of ignorance involve a variety of supplications to the Castle (or defiance of the Castle, in Amalia’s case), and the insightful stance corresponds to the epiphany in Bürgel’s room.

Throughout this stage in the novel K. has done little more than observe, listen and occasionally interject to draw comparisons with his personal plight. There is no increased suffering and he has no more setbacks from the Castle, yet his eyes have been opened to a network of other lives enduring frustration and longing. Much of the information reaching K. is communicated in perlocutionary fashion, and it could be argued that K. does not fully receive the benefit of the baffling and paradoxical statements about the Castle until he is next faced with having to make a decision about how to continue with his

quest – this comes in the meeting with Bürgel, though there are signs beforehand that his commitment to the quest is wavering.

5.2.5 Consequences (action)

*The relatively unaware person stumbles through life making decisions with huge implications, but often without recognizing that they have done so. Because they don't recognize they have made choices, they cannot review or change them, so they experience life as though it is directed by forces outside their control. As a result, they may end up blaming other people – usually an authority such as the government – because they are in a situation they don't like and they feel unable to change it.*²⁶⁰

Before the pivotal scene with Bürgel, K. has issues to resolve at home. It would appear that the first flickering of enlightenment has filtered through to K. as his actions take on a more conciliatory, less aggressive nature. After his first bout of reflection (thanks to the mayor, Gardena and the schoolteacher), K. stormed off and became embroiled in difficult scenes with Klammer's sledge and protocol. After Olga's tale, K. deals with Frieda, Jeremias and an official summons using a more measured approach.

K. leaves Olga's house at a very late hour, mindful that he will struggle to explain his absence to Frieda, but he cannot avoid running into one of the 'Gehilfen'. K. arms himself with a stick, showing his previously hostile attitude to them, but he is surprised to see a very different looking Jeremias waiting for him. The sacked assistant is effectively a 'walking' koan, for his transformation into an old, weary man from a boisterous youngster has happened in hours. K. hears how both Jeremias and Artur were sent by Castle official Galater to lighten his spirits, as he has a tendency to take things too seriously: 'Das Wichtigste aber ist, daß Ihr ihn ein wenig erheitert' (DS 367). They have not been sent to help K. in his surveying, but are there to lighten K.'s mood. Bridgwater suggests that the assistants are sent out to distract K. in a

²⁶⁰ Nagapriya, p. 47.

‘diabolical’ sense, to ensure that he would not find the key to the Castle.²⁶¹

This sets the Castle in opposition with K., but a Buddhist view would prefer to cast the ‘Gehilfen’ as ‘skillful distractors’, in the same way koans undermine K.’s pronounced desire for order and rationality. Their assignment could indicate a Zen approach to deflating K.’s self-importance.²⁶² The Castle has noted that K. is too wrapped up in his quest: ‘Wie man mir berichtet, nimmt er alles sehr schwer. Er ist jetzt ins Dorf gekommen und gleich ist ihm das ein großes Ereignis, während es doch in Wirklichkeit gar nichts ist. Das sollt Ihr ihm beibringen’ (DS 367-368).

Things start well as the assistants salute him and remind him of happier times as a soldier.²⁶³ However, K. ends up treating them like belongings and criticises Gardena for issuing orders to them: ‘es sind meine Gehilfen, Sie aber behandeln sie so, wie wenn es Ihre Gehilfen, aber meine Wächter wären’ (DS 86). That they are referred to as ‘Wächter’ suggests that it is also their role to keep K. ‘awake’, in the sense of not deluded (like Josef K.’s ‘Wächter’). Their koan-like antics, however, fail to deflect K. from forming attachments; for example, they spend most of the time during the meeting with the mayor playing with piles of documents, hinting that perhaps K. should not waste much energy taking on the local bureaucracy. When they finally give up their job, it is because K. is unable to take a joke: ‘Was haben wir denn getan? Ein wenig gescherzt, ein wenig gelacht, ein wenig Deine Braut geneckt’ (DS 367).

K.’s attitude towards Jeremias changes and he no longer treats his former assistant as an annoyance. The damage has already been done, however, for Jeremias has stolen Frieda from him (closing the personal route to Klammer), and Artur has returned to the Castle to file a complaint (which

²⁶¹ Bridgwater, *Kafka’s Novels*, p. 329.

²⁶² ‘A positive attitude doesn’t mean just thinking good thoughts. It means not getting caught up in the seriousness of everything we do, hear, see, feel and relate with.’ Kongtrül, p. 93.

²⁶³ ‘In Erinnerung an seine Militärzeit, an diese glücklichen Zeiten, lachte er’ (DS 31).

blots K.'s official copybook). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to see this consequence of K.'s behaviour as karma, in the sense of a deserved punishment. It is a Western misconception of the force of karma to see it as 'poetic justice', as if the universe made sure that miscreants would always be brought to book for their sins, even if God shirked this responsibility. This Westernised notion of karma satisfies the need for a 'meaningful' order in the world that has a personalised face, as opposed to a natural order that simply exists in itself rather than as a safety net to reassure the fragile human ego that virtue and goodness will be rewarded. For Buddhists, karma operates strictly under the rules of Dependent Origination, which essentially states that 'because this happens, that happens'. It is cause-and-effect but without the value judgment, a crucial difference which sets Buddhist philosophy apart from others. Karma is not the moral police or a spiritual magistrate, considering the worth of our lives, but a set of scientific scales weighing up the sum total of positive and negative energy that we release into the world. Karmic energy turns the wheel of samsara, causes us to be reborn in life after life or moment after moment, so the path to nirvana (no more rebirth) is paved accordingly with more or fewer karmic stepping stones. If we act without ego, without thought of self, our action is free of karmic residue and the wheel of life will turn more slowly until it grinds to a halt. The greater our self-ishness (and the cardinal karmic sin is anger), the deeper the karmic footprint. So K.'s inability to laugh at the 'Gehilfen' and their playfulness has resulted in negative consequences, but this is not 'by design' of the Castle and is attributable to K.'s own conduct.

Barnabas arrives to curtail the discussion with Jeremias, and K. learns that he has been summoned to see Erlanger, another of Klamm's secretaries. With his fortunes on the wane, K. jumps this time at the chance of official contact with the Castle and hurries off. This chapter shows a subtle thawing

in K.'s attitude which can be detected through both illocutionary and perlocutionary communications. The surprising confrontation with a transformed Jeremias causes K. to cast away the stick intended to administer a beating; the news from Barnabas (no doubt thrilled to have delivered a 'proper' message), generates more enthusiasm in K. than the meeting with Momus did, hence K. appears minded to make improvements to his situation in terms of both 'Leben' and 'Amt'.

At the *Herrenhof* K. rushes through the crowd of waiting villagers to get to his appointment, but he then spies Frieda and so he must face the consequences of past actions, the neglect of his bride. K. appears genuinely concerned to win her back and is able to put the imminent meeting with Erlanger out of his mind. This is significant for two reasons, because it shows that the old desperation to pursue a way into the Castle has been weakened and is easily distracted, and it also suggests that K. has started to become more focused and mindful of his actions. The benefit of practising meditation is that the grasping, thirsty mind is stilled and equanimity can take hold. The mind is an unwieldy beast to tame, but the place to start is the present moment, to the exclusion of hopes, fears and desires residing in the past or future. K. has spent little time in the present until this stage in the novel, when he begins to treat each current situation on its own merits. He tries to talk Frieda round and, although he fails, he seems at least to engage with her as a person in her own right rather than as a trophy. This increased mindfulness is evidenced by the fact that he is standing in a corridor waiting to see Erlanger, in what could potentially be an important meeting relating to his quest, but his attention is wholly devoted to the issue with Frieda. It is only when he realises that he has lost her that he turns his attention to Erlanger.

5.2.6 Special law (reflection)

Dogen said: 'Directly upon encountering the dharma, we will abandon the law of the world.' In other words, once we discover the true order behind the appearance of things, our lives will no longer be dominated by the conventional values of society – the seeking to outshine, outrace, outgain.²⁶⁴

The conditions leading to K.'s impromptu meeting with Bürgel are important and pave the way for a skillful outcome, allowing K. to achieve some insight and make progress in his life, if not his quest. K. has had a long day in the village, starting with the commotion in the schoolroom, through the arguments with the assistants, the raised hopes with Hans, the widening cracks in the relationship with Frieda and ending with the long conversation with Olga. K. is tired and the prospect of meeting with Erlanger (achiever) is not enough to sustain any enthusiasm or tap into reserves of energy. He is consumed by an overwhelming weariness that seems to signal a willingness to abandon all the personal and official connections he has striven to make – in Buddhist terms he is on the cusp of The Third Noble Truth, which targets cessation of attachments. It is from this rich spiritual soil that the seeds of his enlightenment will sprout. In order to counterbalance the view that Kafka is a pessimistic writer, there needs to be a discernible element of hope in his work, some evidence of a change of attitude or approach, and the philosophical transformation about to overcome K. is as spectacular as the physical metamorphosis that befalls Gregor Samsa.

From a Buddhist perspective the Bürgel episode takes on great importance as a turning point, for it is here that K. is ostensibly offered a solution to the impasse, a means of reigniting his misfiring quest, a way out of his struggle. In keeping with the bleak, desolate environment that has shrouded K. during his stay in the village, Bürgel's room appears

²⁶⁴ Henry Shukman in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/escape-rat-race-0.

‘unbeschreiblich öde’, but significantly K. leaves the barren room without taking up the secretary’s offer. This is the dawning of understanding, for K. has at least rejected his old *modus operandi*: no more clutching at straws as he effectively renounces his Castle quest.

There is much in the Bürgel hearing which points to the passing of an ‘old’ K. and the emergence of a ‘new’ K. For example, we learn that K. has stumbled into a meeting with a ‘Verbindungssekretär’. K. has spent most of his time in the village trying to cultivate connections – in other words ‘attachments’ – with the Castle and now an opportunity presents itself legitimately. K. does not even have to force the issue, for on learning that K. is a ‘Landvermesser’ without ‘Landvermesserarbeit’ the secretary is ready to take up the case: ‘Ich bin bereit [...] diese Sache weiter zu verfolgen’ (DS 408). Bürgel is concerned whether K. is suffering from this problem, but precisely when a helping hand seems to be reaching out towards him, K.’s suffering starts to fade away: “Ich leide darunter”, sagte K. langsam und lächelte für sich, denn gerade jetzt litt er darunter nicht im geringsten’ (DS 409).

K. is not impressed with Bürgel’s offer, despite the ‘attachment’ secretary’s correct assessment of K.’s situation: ‘Sie scheinen schon einige Enttäuschungen gehabt zu haben’ (DS 409). Bürgel goes on to suggest that the gap between appearance and reality which has plagued K.’s progress so far might not be that great: ‘Ich will nicht untersuchen, wie es sich damit eigentlich verhält, vielleicht entspricht der Schein tatsächlich der Wirklichkeit’ (DS 410). The opportunities now laid at K.’s door are of startling and attractive simplicity, and devoid of all the conditions and provisos that have featured in the chances set up by Frieda, Gardena and Barnabas, through marriage, protocols and letters: ‘Gelegenheiten bei welchen durch ein Wort, durch einen Blick, durch ein Zeichen des Vertrauens mehr erreicht werden kann, als durch lebenslange, auszehrende Bemühungen’ (DS 410). None of this,

however, convinces K. In marked opposition with his earlier tendency to turn every shred of conversation to his own concerns, K. no longer wants to be the centre of attention: 'er hatte jetzt eine große Abneigung gegen alle Dinge, die ihn betrafen' (DS 410).

Bürigel goes into a long description of the circumstances which must prevail if a 'kleines und geschicktes Körnchen' can slip through the net and a request can be granted. The fact that he outlines point by point the exact position in which K. finds himself is lost on K., because he is overcome by drowsiness. It is not just ironic that K. dozes through the chance of a lifetime, but ultimately salutary. Sleep comes to K.'s rescue here, rather than trips him up, or from a Zen viewpoint rescues him *by* tripping him up. The sleep which comes to K.'s aid is completely unlike his ruse 'den Schlafenden zu spielen' which he tried on arrival in the village. It is also unlike the sleep which enveloped him at Lasemann's when he woke up to find himself slumped on somebody's shoulder. What fills K. in Bürigel's office is not so much sleep as a lucid release from the strains of his quest: 'K. schlief, es war zwar kein eigentlicher Schlaf, er hörte Bürgels Worte vielleicht besser als während des frühern totmüden Wachens, Wort für Wort schlug an sein Ohr, aber das lästige Bewußtsein war geschwunden, er fühlte sich frei' (DS 415).²⁶⁵ The loss of his 'self' consciousness results in freedom, a view which would appeal to Buddhist sensibilities.²⁶⁶

Karoline Krauss picks up on the motif of tiredness in *Das Schloß* and suggests that it is related to 'the failure of communication'²⁶⁷ and marks K.'s

265 Bridgwater describes K.'s oncoming sleep as a 'fading of the consciousness that he has been finding so irksome', in *Kafka's Novels*, p. 341. This amounts to a fading of attachment.

266 K.'s sleep has a clear-sighted, meditative quality: 'Anything connected with goals involves a journey toward somewhere from somewhere. In mindfulness practice there is no goal, no journey; you are just mindful of what is happening there.' Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom*, p. 53.

267 Krauss, p. 55.

‘abandonment of the quest for absolutes’.²⁶⁸ But ‘failure’ is a negatively charged word and a ‘skillful’ Buddhist reading would take the view that K. is ready to abandon attachment to self, and his weariness is the precursor to cessation.²⁶⁹

K.’s sleepy withdrawal from the quest is a triumph, not a defeat: ‘Und es war ihm, als sei ihm damit ein großer Sieg gelungen’ (DS 415). There is a dream sequence where a naked Bürgel struggles to cover his embarrassment, ‘seine Blößen zu decken’ (DS 416). The fact that the ‘attachment’ secretary is exposed suggests that his offer of assistance is bogus (or ‘empty’ to use a Buddhist term), which amuses K.: ‘K. lächelte darüber sanft im Schlaf, wie der Sekretär aus seiner stolzen Haltung durch K.’s Vorstöße immer aufgeschreckt wurde’ (DS 415-416). As the dream unfolds, K. leaves Bürgel behind and moves into a great room, ready to meet whatever opponent should challenge him. But there is nobody to oppose K., no audience to watch and a shattered Champagne glass on the ground, perhaps signifying that K. has now progressed to a realm beyond victory and defeat: ‘K. war allein in einem großen Raum, kampfbereit drehte er sich herum und suchte den Gegner, es war aber niemand mehr da’ (DS 416). This is also very close to Buddhist ideas, as the lack of ‘other’ suggests an end to dualistic thinking.

K. sinks deeper and deeper into sleep, and nods smilingly at Bürgel as he is filled with a sense of enlightenment, freed from the struggle that has consumed him: ‘zwischen den zuständigen Sekretären auf der einen Seite und den unzuständigen auf der andern und angesichts der Masse der voll beschäftigten Parteien würde er in tiefen Schlaf sinken und auf diese Weise allem entgehn’ (DS 419). As Bürgel’s increasingly impassioned account of how

268 Krauss, p. 62.

269 Thomas Cleary discusses the link between giving up attachment and achieving perfect insight in his study of the Buddhist scriptures known as the *Prajnaparamita* (perfection of wisdom): ‘By virtue of nonattachment to everything, you should have perfect insight’ (p. 17).

to pierce the Castle's defences reaches a crescendo, K. is as removed, or disengaged, as possible from this erstwhile craving. Bürgel's concluding remark tells K. that any interested party merely has to ask in order to get: 'ihre Bitte irgendwie vorzubringen, für welche die Erfüllung schon bereit ist' (DS 424). But K. is now free of such concerns: 'Mehr hörte K. nicht, er schlief, abgeschlossen gegen alles was geschah' (DS 424). Kuna takes the dark view that 'sleep is a brother of death', suggesting a grim fate for K.²⁷⁰ Alternatively, sleep can be seen as a source of regeneration, a relaxation of attachments and therefore a brother of meditation.

K.'s failure to take up Bürgel's offer can be read on one level as ironic, in that K. was just too tired from all his efforts to grasp the opportunity. This would be a very pessimistic view, for it assumes firstly that the offer is genuine and secondly that the one-in-a-million chance has now slipped away, condemning K. to further struggles down in the village, out of reach of the Castle for good. The more hopeful (Buddhist) stance would see K. subconsciously reject Bürgel's offer, in a newfound understanding that the offer is spurious: it is one more false dawn and Bürgel cannot actually deliver (just wait for the subsequent equivocations and qualifications), or K. has finally realised that what he is seeking is itself ultimately a delusion and the recipe for discontent. In other words, perhaps he sees, with real insight, that the quest to gain existential assurances is in itself flawed, doomed to failure and perpetual dissatisfaction. Post-Bürgel, K. disengages himself from the quest, never again referring to the Castle or Klammer as goals to acquire, and this disinclination has significant Buddhist characteristics: 'Disenchantment is an important step on the way to enlightenment [...] which starts with the acknowledgment of our own suffering.'²⁷¹ His focus is trained instead on his

270 Kuna, p. 138.

271 Khema, p. 108.

fellow villagers and for the first time he listens to their stories (Pepi, the 'Wirtin') without mixing in his own obsessions and shifting the conversation to his own agenda.

There has been some debate as to whether Bürgel should be considered a positive or a negative figure. Politzer classifies him as an 'Information Giver', specifically 'the most sophisticated in the long line of Kafka's doorkeepers' who are there to point the way for frustrated heroes.²⁷² Bürgel tries to enlighten K. and in reply to 'the salvation Bürgel offers him, K. succumbs to sleep'.²⁷³ Kuna takes the view that K. does not miss anything but makes a conscious decision to refuse Bürgel's 'mystical union'.²⁷⁴ The only other option for K. would be 'tantamount to giving in to death', and K.'s triumphant dream is then nothing more than a caricature with no way of 'bypassing the problem altogether'.²⁷⁵ This seems excessively negative for it is just such a 'bypass of suffering' that is offered through mindfulness and the way of detachment.

The end of the novel, however, does not arrive with this missed chance in Bürgel's room, but two chapters later, and this suggests that the Bürgel scene does not denote a definitive failure. From a Buddhist point of view, there are two possible alternatives. First, Bürgel is not an Information-Giver, in the mould of the chaplain, but a deceiver ('fremde Hilfe') such as Huld or Titorelli. He holds out unreasonable hopes and thus K. is right to ignore him. On the other hand, Bürgel is indeed an Information-Giver, but of the Zen variety in that he speaks in paradoxes and through koans, an ironic 'secretary for attachments'. He offers impossible solutions which bewilder and lead to weariness, hence K.'s refusal. Read in this way, Bürgel is successful in

²⁷² Politzer, p. 257.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 255.

²⁷⁴ Kuna, p. 163.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 164.

stimulating a response of non-attachment in K., an ostensibly 'irrational' refusal of an easy (but perhaps illusory) answer to his problems.

Although K. rejects Bürgel, he does not concede defeat or withdraw from the village.²⁷⁶ On the contrary, the remaining chapters suggest better social integration, an encouraging sign also noted by Krauss, for whom K. is transformed into a valued member of the community.²⁷⁷ She goes so far as to say that K. 'renounces his role as land-surveyor' during the Bürgel scene and never mentions it again, thus signifying a development in his subjectivity and independence.²⁷⁸ In fact, K. does talk about land-surveying to the 'Wirtin' in the final scene, but she gets bored listening to his description, which suggests that K. offers a detailed technical account of his role. Thus it could be said that K.'s metamorphosis is not about greater subjectivity but about increased mindfulness, as he abandons his metaphysical quest and knuckles down to ordinary village life.

5.2.7 Letting go (action)

Student: I have nothing.

*Master: Then throw it away.*²⁷⁹

The most convincing evidence of K.'s burgeoning enlightenment comes post-Bürgel, as the final part of the novel sees K. acting in a more 'skillful' way. His interactions with officialdom (Erlanger), the quest (the stray document), a potential helper (Pepi) and a disinterested villager ('die Wirtin') show the extent of his new attitude.

As if to underline the significance of refusing help from Bürgel, K. staggers out of the meeting with the 'attachment' secretary and falls straight

276 Bridgwater sees this differently: K.'s inability to respond to Bürgel is tragic and his defeat 'has been seized from the jaws of potential victory'. Bridgwater, *Kafka's Novels*, p. 344.

277 Krauss, p. 87.

278 Ibid., p. 64.

279 Timothy Freke in Titmuss, p. 181.

into an appointment with the 'achievement' secretary, Erlanger. K. is asked to help with the reinstatement of Frieda, and his assistance could have benefits for his quest: 'Ich tue schon viel mehr als nötig ist, wenn ich erwähne, daß, wenn Sie sich in dieser Kleinigkeit bewähren, Ihnen dies in Ihrem Fortkommen gelegentlich nützlich sein kann' (DS 428). The idea of 'achieving' through 'Erlanger' is highly ironic and on a par with getting 'guarantees' through Bürgel. By this time, however, K. is starting to see the light and has realised the 'Nutzlosigkeit aller seiner Bestrebungen' (DS 429).

K.'s brief appointment with Erlanger also offers a little cameo on the subject of change. The subject of the meeting is how Klammer's 'Behagen' could be impaired by the slightest new detail in his routine. Frieda leaves her barmaid duties on account of K., and Pepi takes her place. Hence, the unexpected arrival of a new serving girl's hand on Klammer's beer glass could have untold consequences: 'jede belanglose Veränderung der belanglosesten Dinge [kann] ernstlich stören' (DS 427-428).

The episode with Erlanger 'achieves' koan status in three ways: first, there is the nonsense of the all-powerful authorities (which record every minute detail of village life in protocols) not knowing that Frieda is already back in the tap-room. Second, there is the notion contained at the heart of Erlanger's request, that Klammer 'might' be upset or inconvenienced by a different serving girl bringing his beer. Of course, it is unlikely that Klammer would even notice such a trivial matter, but his minions strive to cover every eventuality, an impossible task which recalls Josef K.'s vain attempts to prove his innocence in an exhaustive account of his life. The third twist to the request is the risibly vague and insubstantial offer of hope dangled before K., when he has just turned down Bürgel's key to the Castle's inner sanctum. The juxtaposition of the offers from Erlanger and Bürgel reveal the intrinsic emptiness of attachment to any worldly phenomena. Given the universal

characteristic of impermanence (Erlanger's 'jede belanglose Veränderung'), the outcome of all self-fuelled desires is inevitably suffering, and hence the cessation of craving should extinguish suffering.

The scene with the 'Diener' distributing files is as significant as the Bürgel scene because it shows that K. has rejected the path of attachments through enlightened choice, not tired resignation. Without this crucial moment of evidence, it would be possible to construe K.'s abandoned quest as a capitulation rather than conversion, but in fact his shift in attitude is salutary. Standing in the corridor observing the attendants distributing files to officials, K. has softened his sceptical, antagonistic stance towards officialdom: 'K. betrachtete das alles nicht nur mit Neugier, sondern auch mit Teilnahme. Er fühlte sich fast wohl inmitten des Getriebes' (DS 432). This view contrasts with the horror that gripped K. at the thought of being forced into 'Arbeitersein' and its constricting duties and responsibilities: 'die Gewalt der entmutigenden Umgebung, der Gewöhnung an Enttäuschungen, die Gewalt der unmerklichen Einflüsse jedes Augenblicks, die fürchtete er allerdings' (DS 43).

K. suffers from tiredness throughout the scenes with Bürgel and Erlanger, but he realises that his exhaustion is different to that displayed by the officials. K.'s weariness stems from his aimless struggling, but the tiredness of the Castle employees exudes a sense of satisfaction: 'Hier war es wohl die Müdigkeit inmitten glücklicher Arbeit, etwas was nach außenhin wie Müdigkeit aussah und eigentlich unzerstörbare Ruhe, unzerstörbarer Frieden war' (DS 430). It is also tempting to remember the only work K. does in the novel, on the first morning in the school when his diligence and improved attitude pass the time and help reconcile with the teacher.

The transformation is complete when K. witnesses a stray document being torn up. Unsure in which file and to which official the paper should go, one of the attendants simply destroys it. It crosses K.'s mind that the

document could be related to his own case. But whereas the earlier K. would have seen injustice and conspiracy, 'new' K. is prepared to pardon the irregularity, and even goes so far as to think that perhaps it was just his view of the event that was skewed: 'Es war wohl die erste Unregelmäßigkeit, die K. hier im Bureaubetrieb gesehen hatte, allerdings war es möglich, daß er auch sie unrichtig verstand. Und selbst wenn es eine Unregelmäßigkeit war, war sie zu verzeihen' (DS 439). This is indeed a stunning change in attitude, which sees K. echo the mayor's view that it is impossible to know if the Castle's apparent mistakes really are mistakes.

This scene would trouble readers from a Judaeo-Christian perspective because the lost document will never be recovered, an unfilled gap.²⁸⁰ This view, however, bases meaning on the need for a firm foundation and the meaninglessness of the Castle is a given, as all phenomena are characterised by it. The difficulty is managing transience, and this is best done through detachment and mindfulness, as K. has started to do. A more sinister interpretation would see a Castle conspiracy, aimed at thwarting K.'s progress.²⁸¹ But this does not tally with K.'s upbeat outlook after the scene; if anything, the 'Diener' are serving up another koan as they literally shred K.'s attachment to the Castle and allow him to move on in life.

K. is eventually frogmarched away from the hallway and rebuked by the landlord for trespassing in such a sensitive area. However, the landlord is unaware of the change that has come over K., who calmly and politely explains he has just been to a couple of hearings, regrets the intrusion and accepts full blame for the incident: 'Die Erwähnung der beiden Verhöre, gar jenes von

280 For Krauss, the distribution of files reveals the 'ultimate uselessness and meaninglessness of the Castle' (p. 72).

281 Kuna suggests the servant tears up the stray document to exact the 'Castle's revenge for K.'s unwarranted intrusion' (p. 168).

Erlanger, und der Respekt, mit welchem K. von den Herren sprach, stimmten ihm den Wirt günstig' (DS 449).

So what has caused this metamorphosis in K.? There appears to have been some kind of awakening from slumber, as if he has emerged at last from a great fog of ignorance and delusion. The last chapter of the novel begins with the words 'als K. erwachte' and it may not be too farfetched to suggest that K.'s sleepy impromptu hearing with Bürgel brings down the curtain on 'old' K.'s life and enables a new K. to step on to the stage. His emergence from sleep can be seen as a fresh start in the village, which contrasts starkly with his initial arrival: K.'s 'groundhog days' are behind him.

The evidence of K.'s untying of ties, of his systematic cessation of attachments, shines through in the two final scenes of the novel, when K.'s interaction with other village figures is portrayed. First, he talks with Pepi and considers her individual situation by drawing on his personal experience, and second he enters into an exchange with the 'Wirtin', which is not predicated on his personal designs on the Castle.

After listening to Pepi's laments about her failed stint in the taproom, K. delivers a thoughtful speech about her ill-advised actions and extends the criticism to himself. He bookends his words with an important declaration, in Buddhist terms: 'Ich weiß nicht, ob es so ist' (DS 484/485). Zen master Seung Sahn based his teaching on 'don't-know-mind', because he maintained that knowledge is one of the last refuges of the self, a safe haven in which we cling to our identity. For Krauss these statements point to a key passage in the novel because K. admits to lacking 'objective proof' and prefers to focus on a 'genuine desire for sincere self-determination'.²⁸²

²⁸² Krauss, p. 82.

K. appears to have achieved some measure of understanding about the misguidedness of his quest, so he is able to analyse Pepi's complaints and conclude that she is the one who is suffering from self-deception. He explains that she simply was not up to the job, and it may not be coincidence that for the first time in the novel the term 'Einsicht' is coupled with K. in a positive manner, suggesting his eyes have opened: 'Wie klar muß diese Nichteignung sein, wenn sogar ich, der Deiner Meinung nach Unwissendste das einsehe' (DS 481). Pepi sees only 'einen Schimmer der Wahrheit' (DS 480), so now it is K. who can rebuke somebody else for their ignorance.

In a less 'intentional' manner, but still with effects reverberating out towards other people, K.'s wooing and losing of Frieda cause Pepi first to become the new barmaid at the *Herrenhof* and then to lose her position: 'Und was war daran schuld? K. vor allem' (DS 455). As well as blaming an unsuspecting K., Pepi also blames her youth and inexperience, beyond which she cannot expect to progress: 'sie kenne trotz ihrer Jugend das Leben und ihr Unglück sei nur eine Bestätigung ihrer Kenntnisse' (DS 479). It is at this point that a 'new' K. shows his hand, as he reveals a level of perception not previously apparent before his meeting with Bürgel. K. squarely lays the blame at Pepi's delusions and comes up with an uncharacteristically mature assessment of the situation: 'Du willst immerfort betrogen worden sein, weil Dir das schmeichelt und weil es Dich rührt. Die Wahrheit aber ist, daß Du für diese Stelle nicht geeignet bist' (DS 481). This transformation suggests that K. has started the process of dissolving his attachments and developing a fresh outlook.²⁸³

New 'enlightened' K. does not only have words of advice for Pepi: he is self-aware enough to include his own behaviour in the criticism. It is not that

283 Ronald Gray similarly sees the value of K.'s conversation with Pepi because the erstwhile headstrong land surveyor appears 'remarkably calm and sane', suggesting 'liberation of some sort' (p. 169).

a defeatist K. has thrown in the towel and yielded to an invincible Castle. He now seems able to grasp the idea that the nature of his struggle was deluded:

Ich weiß nicht ob es so ist, auch ist mir meine Schuld gar nicht klar,
nur wenn ich mich mit Dir vergleiche, taucht mir etwas derartiges auf;
so als ob wir uns beide zu sehr, zu lärmend, zu kindisch, zu
unerfahren bemüht hätten. (DS 484)

In an interesting parallel, a similar comment is made by Josef K. in *Der Proceß*, when in a rare moment of insight he reflects that he may well have gone about his life in the wrong way, grasping (attaching himself to) his world 'mit zwanzig Händen' (DP 308). These contrasting self-evaluations are clear evidence that K. has learnt from his experience and had time to adapt, in a way that his forerunner ultimately was not able to.

In the concluding scene, K. comes across as an independent individual, no longer buffeted by the vagaries of official approval. Fittingly, he shares the stage with the 'Wirtin', with whom he has had no specific dealings and from whom he can seek no favour, hence they can begin a relationship with a clean slate. In his earlier 'Verbindungen' in the village, the initial clean slate has always been quickly sullied by desires of help ('fremde Hilfe') to progress his cause.

When the landlady asks what he does, she gets a simple one-word answer: 'Landvermesser'. K. does not launch into a diatribe about the Castle or explore the nuances of whether his role is 'scheinbar', 'wirklich' or 'amtlich'. K. accepts the role of land surveyor and when the 'Wirtin' asks what that job entails, his description just raises a yawn. Significantly, we are not given the details of the description, because the working practices of a surveyor do not define a person, merely add a few brushstrokes to their appearance.

K. shows that he now understands that to accept he is the land surveyor – official or not – is just a convenient means of establishing a temporary, non-grasping hold on who and what he is. Similarly, the job of being a landlady

does not tell the whole story about the person: 'Ich weiß nicht, was Du sonst noch bist. Ich sehe nur daß Du eine Wirtin bist und außerdem Kleider trägst, die nicht für eine Wirtin passen und wie sie auch sonst meines Wissens niemand hier im Dorfe trägt' (DS 492).

Among K.'s last words in the novel the term 'Ziel' crops up again, but this time the quest belongs to the landlady: 'ich sagte ja, daß Du nicht nur Wirtin bist, Du zielst auf etwas anderes ab' (DS 494). At last, K. is beginning to see clearly and he scores a direct hit with his observation, so much so that the landlady is keen to invite him back to see her. K. is now setting the koans to test others, which shows how far he has progressed since his early exchanges in the community.

K.'s week in the village feels longer than Josef K.'s year in *Der Proceß*, but this may be attributable to the varied fronts on which K. was fighting and the intake of information, both illocutionary and perlocutionary, that enables him to develop as a figure. Josef K. protested his innocence from start to finish, with barely a flicker of readjustment in his attitude, despite all the messages that were delivered to him, directly and indirectly. His case could have lasted twenty years and he would still have failed to register any increased awareness of his condition (like Kaufmann Block perhaps). K., on the other hand, though in a somewhat different predicament, is constantly re-evaluating his position and trying new approaches, which accelerates the passage of time. His wealth of experience, both anecdotal (via the lives of other villagers) and personal (via his repeated failures) contributes significantly to conquering his ignorance and setting him on the path to enlightenment.

5.3 Sleepwalking into suffering

The work of Buddhism is to awaken, to come out of the sleepy dreams and notions of reality that we hold to be true and replace them with a direct experience of what is more accurately occurring. To awaken in this way, we

*need to become conscious of what's actually going on at the very depths of our experience.*²⁸⁴

For much of the novel, K. is oblivious to the wider implications of his actions as he trawls the village looking for a way into the Castle. His self-centred tenacity marks him out as another sleepwalker, a little too self-absorbed to notice he is heading for a fall. But where Josef K.'s dream ends in a nightmare, K. wakes up from his bubble of self-importance and finds himself surrounded by 'real' people with lives of their own. He begins to treat them as individuals in their own right, a mark of his awakened outlook.

K.'s self-ishness is the primary feature of his actions throughout the text. Attachment (to self) is the cause of suffering, and there is ample evidence of K.'s tendency to weave concerns regarding his self into whatever issues are being discussed. He cannot listen for long to Gardena's account of her relationship with Klammm without alluding to his own situation: 'Die Wirtin fand es ungebührlich daß sich K. mit seinen Angelegenheiten hier einmischen wollte' (DS 127). K. makes no excuses for leading the story towards his personal concerns: 'ich [muß] bei Klamms Erwähnung immer auch an mich denken, das ist nicht zu ändern' (DS 127-128). Gardena resumes the story of her younger days, but it isn't long before K.'s comments return to matters closer to home, as he wonders why she did not ask Klammm about her fall from favour: 'So wären wir also wieder bei Ihnen' (DS 136).

In his self-centredness, K. sees links to himself in even the smallest details. After his unsuccessful attempt at catching Klammm in his sledge K. returns to the inn, but no sooner has he left the scene of his empty triumph than Klammm slips out and departs. Momus remarks how Klammm had glanced around nervously and K.'s self-preoccupied interpretation is that the official

284 Will Johnson in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/awakening-direct-experience.

may have been looking for him: 'Vielleicht hat er mich gesucht' (DS 173). The audacity and farfetchedness of such a claim make everyone laugh.

Another problem area is K.'s general ignorance. This lack of insight is exacerbated by a lack of concentration and mindfulness, in Buddhist eyes key attributes for any person seeking the truth. It is foolhardy to declare a goal and pursue it blindly and doggedly, regardless of the new circumstances and conditions which will invariably arise in a universe characterised by impermanence. K. is so fixated on his goal, that he overlooks the means to reach it. He stumbles over details, interpretations, assumptions and loses his way, because keeping the Castle in his sights is more important than watching the road he is travelling on.

It is not just the Castle hierarchy that tests K.'s powers of focus and understanding, because he also falls prey to misinterpretations when dealing with the villagers. Gardena gives K. a torrid time in this respect as he repeatedly misconstrues what she says, as well as what she doesn't say. At one point his request for permission to ask her a question is met with silence, which he mistakenly takes as a refusal: 'Sie mißdeuten alles, auch das Schweigen. Sie können eben nicht anders. Ich erlaube Ihnen zu fragen' (DS 129). K. fares little better when Gardena struggles to explain to him how cooperating with Momus in compiling the protocol might just lead to some kind of link with Klammer. K., however, 'twists her words' when he asks Momus to confirm that a mention in the report would secure him an audience with the official: 'So ist er immer, Herr Sekretär, so ist er immer. Fälscht die Auskünfte, die man ihm gibt, und behauptet dann, falsche Auskünfte bekommen zu haben' (DS 180).

K. arrives in the village in a state of ignorance and, until the Bürger episode, makes no steps towards enlightenment despite covering a lot of ground. In a Buddhist sense, K. errs because he expends all his energy in

trying to 'know' the unknowable and grasp the ungraspable. He demands recognition and security from the powers that be, but in a world of flux, not-self and impermanence, no such guarantees exist.

Gardena dismisses K. as 'entsetzlich unwissend' (DS 90), but in spite of this criticism K. boasts of his ignorance because it emboldens him to venture further than he otherwise would: 'es hat doch auch den Vorteil, daß der Unwissende mehr wagt und deshalb will ich die Unwissenheit und ihre gewiß schlimmen Folgen gerne noch ein Weilchen tragen' (DS 91). Ignorance of things not worth knowing is not a disadvantage, and may be beneficial if it means our mind is uncluttered with useless facts. But K. wears his ignorance like a shield, as if it will protect him from harm and enable him to progress untroubled to his goal.

K. suffers from the results of his ignorance and cravings, but he also causes suffering for others through his ill-considered actions. This is exemplified by Barnabas and his fragile disposition as a barely-recognised messenger. At one point, K. makes plain his dissatisfaction with Barnabas's achievements, but he only learns later from Olga of the detrimental effect his criticism has had on the messenger's fragile sense of self: 'Diese Worte haben ihn um den Schlaf gebracht' (DS 276). After his meeting with the mayor, K. returns to the inn to find out that the otherwise fearsome, confident Gardena has taken to her bed because she was afraid K. was going to trouble Klamm.

K.'s attitude towards relationships is indicative of his acquisitive nature – friendships are connections to be gained, support to be accumulated and filed as 'achieved' (past) rather than nurtured in the present. On his first outing in the village K. tries and fails to make friends with the teacher. He experiences the need to make new acquaintances, but that just aggravates the situation: 'Es zog ihn unwiderstehlich hin, neue Bekanntschaften zu suchen, aber jede neue Bekanntschaft verstärkte die Müdigkeit' (DS 20-21). The term 'müde'

appears regularly at points where K. tries to make ‘connections’, and the signs of tiredness suggest an inkling of the futility of pursuing attachments – it foreshadows the low point of his tenacity in Bürgel’s room.

During his initial foray into the village when he meets the schoolteacher with his class, K. is ‘verblüfft’ when his apparently simple question whether the teacher knows anything about the Castle is rebuffed with a reply in French to protect the ears of innocent children. Already something is amiss: ‘K. aber war zerstreut, durch das Gespräch verärgert. Zum erstenmal seit seinem Kommen fühlte er wirkliche Müdigkeit’ (DS 20).

The terms ‘verblüfft’ and ‘zerstreut’ indicate classic responses to a Zen koan and the teacher’s sudden switch into French is enough to annoy K. Further investigation offers some insight into the teacher’s behaviour for K.’s question to him related to knowledge of the Castle or Count, the supreme authority. A Zen master posing the question ‘Who is the Buddha’ received the famous answer ‘Three pounds of flax’, which sounds nonsensical but actually qualifies as a very adept way of countering a pointless query.²⁸⁵ The Buddha’s person, background or knowledge is ultimately irrelevant to the seeker of enlightenment, who must chart his own path. The teacher’s French seems an equally odd way of deflecting what is to his mind a pointless question.

Bridgwater picks up on K.’s distractibility (a trait evident in Josef K. too) and interprets it as ‘the measure of his moral irresponsibility’.²⁸⁶ However, another view is possible which takes it as the characteristic of a mind out of control, a self which is slave to its many and varied desires. K. is powerless to focus, to become ‘mindful’, because he can never dwell on the task in hand and always maintains reference points with past and future. To paraphrase

285 ‘A monk asked Tozan, “What is Buddha?” Tozan replied, “Masagin!” [three pounds of flax]’. Case 12 from the *Mumonkan* (The Gateless Gate), in *Two Zen Classics*, p. 179.

286 Bridgwater, *Kafka’s Novels*, p. 222.

the advice of the chaplain in *Der Proceß*, K. cannot see two steps in front of him, but in fact is always busy plotting a pathway ten steps ahead, instead of considering where he is standing in the present.

In the final analysis, K. starts off as an obsessive character whose self-centredness causes his ignorance about the world (Castle) to become entrenched, and until the Bürgel scene he struggles to achieve any kind of 'Überblick'. Pre-Bürgel, K. cuts an ungracious and suspicious figure as he only sees what he wants to see and chooses to overlook everything else. His assistants, for example, look very alike but K. cannot be bothered to distinguish between them, even though everybody else can manage it: 'Ich sehe nur mit meinen Augen' (DS 33). He barely considers them people in their own right, and he is dismissive of the unpleasantness that attitude may cause them.

K.'s rigidity and inability to adjust to change are at the heart of his profound discontent with the life on offer in the village. With tacit permission to stay as 'self-appointed' land surveyor, K.'s situation is comfortable, but he can only accept as ideal the scenario which he has set himself. After a series of perlocutionary awakenings, he is able to recognise that satisfaction with his situation will be facilitated by dissolving attachments.

5.4 Conclusion

There are two ways to take care of your life. You can develop yourself as an artist, or you can forget yourself and devote your life to art. That's a big difference. The first is to enslave yourself in your ego. It feels good for a while, but it doesn't last for long. This is to become a host for the guest. The second way is to become a host for the host. You must turn your ego into fuel and burn your life for the benefit of all beings. You will become a kind of fool. But this is the way to find peace.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁷ Dainin Katagiri in Titmuss, p. 265.

Unlike his fellow protagonists in other stories, the K. of *Das Schloß* is not tortured or executed: he neither drowns nor rots away, indeed he does not die. K.'s concerted efforts to gain access to the Castle simply melt away after his meeting with Bürgel and the novel ends with him taking part in everyday talk with the landlady of the *Herrenhof*. Whether or not the novel was unfinished or even unfinishable, it is noteworthy that K. shows signs of adjustment to a new life beyond the Castle-quest. For Cixous, 'Kafka's strongest writings are those that are unfinished, that he was only beginning, over and over again', and in this sense the novel's indeterminate conclusion leaves K.'s situation open.²⁸⁸

K.'s quest is characterised by conflicting references to freedom and belonging, painting the picture of a man who is ultimately confused or deluded as to what he wants. At the beginning of the novel, K. reveals this inner dichotomy to the Bridge Inn landlord, unsure as to whether life within the Castle walls might not be too oppressive: 'Sollte ich z. B. hier unten arbeiten, dann wird es auch vernünftiger sein, hier unten zu wohnen. Auch fürchte ich, daß mir das Leben oben im Schloß nicht zusagen würde. Ich will immer frei sein' (DS 14). Before his quest has properly begun, K.'s ability to formulate such a thought suggests that the seeds of enlightenment are present in his mind. Josef K. did not have moments of lucidity (except on the way to his execution) and so this early expression of dualistic suffering marks out K. as a potential learner. This nascent awareness is not triggered until he meets Bürgel and realises that his twin desires of official sanction and personal liberty are illusory.

For those expecting a 'big' ending to the novel, the last chapter seems to just peter out into a mundane parochiality. There are no fireworks in a showdown with the authorities and a distinct lack of blood. The 'damp squib'

²⁸⁸ Cixous, p. 2.

that is provided by a discussion of the landlady's wardrobe feels like a feeble, inconclusive or contradictory finale to the Castle quest, after all K.'s earlier efforts. His situation seems unstable, his achievements undefined. In short, it is difficult to ascribe a positive 'meaning' to the novel, and hence the ending gives rise to negative interpretations.

Kuna feels the work is 'oriented towards the theme of death',²⁸⁹ and sums up the paradoxical message of the novel as 'To strive *and* not to strive' (author's italics).²⁹⁰ Though K. does not die, his survival reflects a 'hard-won acceptance of the primary condition of human existence: its inevitable end in death', which fits in with Kuna's overall idea of literature as corrective punishment.²⁹¹

K.'s survival in itself sets him apart from Kafka's previous characters, but his apparent lack of engagement or 'fighting spirit' sits uneasily with philosophies based on self-fulfilment. For Erich Heller, the inscrutability and impregnability of the Castle mean that the Kafkaesque world becomes a 'totally incalculable domain ruled by evil demons'.²⁹² A Zen view would accept paradox without frustration, as the ambiguities and non-sense prompt a reaction to the instinctive human search for any trace of reason in a confusing world. The only death in the novel is the cessation of K.'s quest, or attachments. His earlier dependency on the primacy of self in the face of universal transience is rejected as deluded and life continues. This is a true survival and there is no need to link K.'s 'surrender' to death or demons.

Judaeo-Christian judgments of the novel tend to accentuate the negative, as shown by Heller's remarks: 'Never before has absolute darkness been

289 Kuna, p. 169.

290 Ibid., p. 182.

291 Ibid., p. 136.

292 Erich Heller, 'The Castle: A Company of Gnostic Demons' in Harold Bloom, ed., *Franz Kafka's The Castle* (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), pp. 83-84.

represented with so much clarity.’²⁹³ This air of desperation may also be traced back to the author: ‘Kafka’s energies seem to be exhausted on these last pages; eventually the labyrinth succeeded in trapping its own creator.’²⁹⁴ The image of the labyrinth portrays K. as a victim because he does not choose to be trapped in a maze: he either wanders into one unluckily, or is lured into one by the (deceiving) governing authority, the Castle. This exonerates K. from blame, but does not help find a way out.

Given such an outlook it is understandable why critics have felt that Kafka had written himself into a corner. Ronald Gray, for example, feels K.’s denial of Bürgel and the Castle was not brave and heroic but ‘a drifting, quietistic absence of self-regard’.²⁹⁵ His largely negative view of the ending of the novel has Kafka ‘groping in darkness’ and the ‘tedium of the final chapter’ is a result of K.’s ‘weariness of spirit’.²⁹⁶ This conclusion is perhaps inevitable for Gray as he sees no ‘guiding centre’ in the novel, and the transformation in K. is devoid of virtue or moral progress.²⁹⁷ Although K.’s enlightenment is not morally driven, it would be wrong to suggest there is no guidance in the work. Throughout K.’s troubles, and in the earlier *Der Proceß*, a consistent theme of suffering through attachment can be detected and the ‘trail of breadcrumbs’ left in the texts through paradoxes and perlocutions indicates the dangers of ignorance and self-delusion.

The inconclusive end of the novel would sit uneasily with Western readers who value certainty and clarity. Politzer maintains the final scenes ‘do not provide us with any new hints about unexpected turns ahead on K.’s way’.²⁹⁸ He claims furthermore that K. is no nearer to the truth at any point in

293 Heller, ‘Gnostic Demons’, p. 83.

294 Politzer, p. 263.

295 Ronald Gray, p. 168.

296 Ibid., p. 168.

297 Ibid., p. 162.

298 Politzer, p. 262.

the novel than in the first paragraph, suggesting that 'it is characteristic of Kafka's labyrinth that one is nearer to truth the instant before one enters the maze.'²⁹⁹ A Buddhist reading, however, would find significant and unexpected change in K. in the scenes with Erlanger, the file distributions and the conversations with Pepi and the 'Wirtin'. It is possible for a reader to get lost in key places in Kafka's labyrinthine narrative, but K. at least shows considerable insight in his decision to renounce his fruitless meandering and withdraw from the maze.

Kafka's ending may not exactly be the stuff of great inspiration or hope. But taken in context with the grim conclusions in many of his other stories, and set alongside the 'way' outlined for Buddhist enlightenment, K.'s survival and apparent indifference to his erstwhile existence-affirming quest are highly significant. After a seamless, overpowering obsession with claiming his 'rights' (punctuated only by Amalia's story), the post-Bürgel K. engages in a number of exchanges with villagers without his usual wont of referring everything back to his own situation. Early K. was incapable of holding any conversation without turning it round to his own Castle-related concerns, so the radical change from driven, self-obsessed pretender to humble listener is remarkable.

The transformation need not be seen as the defeat of a broken man, moreover, for the final pages of the novel hardly exude the language of despair and resignation.³⁰⁰ K.'s abandonment of his Castle fixation could just be construed as the first gentle loosening of his grasp on a misguided attachment. The 'wisdom' of K.'s detachment offers some evidence that the first steps have been made towards enlightenment.

²⁹⁹ Politzer, p. 281.

³⁰⁰ Heller maintains readers are 'terrified by the despair' of *Das Schloß* because it tells us no comfort can be found in this world. 'Gnostic Demons', p. 104.

We see K. arrive in the village as an outsider, restless, aggressive, stubborn, self-serving in his determination to claim a direct and meaningful place in the Castle. We leave him as a calmer, more even-tempered figure, having achieved a measure of integration in the community. The transformation was not miraculous, but made possible by a weary rejection of craving and attachment, and completed by understanding the folly and delusions of his earlier struggle. The story of K. need not be the tale of an ordinary man whose dreams are crushed by overpowering forces: it can also be seen as the tale of an ignorant man whose suffering is alleviated by the power of clear sight. In this respect, the principles underlying Buddhist philosophy can provide a useful guide.

In the quotation heading this section, Katagiri suggests becoming a fool is the way to find peace. It is interesting to note that the 'Wirtin' has the final say on K. in *Das Schloß* and she is confused by K.'s responses: 'Du bist entweder ein Narr oder ein Kind oder ein sehr böser, gefährlicher Mensch' (DS 494). As a 'Traumwandler', K. would fit the description of a fool, wandering aimlessly without attachments, within reach of peace without knowing it, in true Zen fashion.

Chapter 6 *Ein Hungerkünstler* (collection)

6.1 Introduction

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the cup overflow until he could no longer restrain himself. 'It is overfull. No more will go in!'

*'Like this cup,' Nan-in said, 'you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?'*³⁰¹

The stories published in 1924 under the title *Ein Hungerkünstler* hold a special position in the body of Kafka's work as his final literary statement. Although near to death, Kafka took a close interest in their composition and this chapter focuses on how the collection shows developments in his outlook and expression when compared with earlier writing.

To recap, this dissertation challenges the widespread Western view that Kafka's work paints a negative picture of the human condition, condemned to an unrecognisable, inhospitable world of suffering devoid of its traditional 'landmarks': God, law, authority, reason. In contrast, I have argued that Kafka's fiction suggests how suffering is invariably self-inflicted through attachment and ignorance, and how suffering can be dissolved by letting go of fixations through enlightenment. This position bears the hallmarks of Buddhist philosophy.

The four stories in this collection all have links to the theme of attachment, but they differ in approach. There is variety in length, narrator, tone, focus and outcome, but taken together the stories counterbalance: there is an alignment of purpose, namely to expose the suffering that comes when the self is taken as the central point of focus for one's existence, and further to

301 Paul Reys and Nyogen Senzaki, eds, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), p. 7.

suggest the lack of suffering that would follow once attachment to self has been dissolved.

Chronologically speaking, the earliest works in the collection are *Erstes Leid* and *Ein Hungerkünstler* (1921/1922). Written in the third person, they are both negative stories, inasmuch as the leading characters fare badly, but their real pain derives from ignorance rather than sorrow or injury. They lack insight, and their fixations distort their outlook and make equilibrium impossible.

Erstes Leid, as the title suggests, investigates the start of the process, where a seemingly successful life characterised by achievement succumbs to doubt and dissatisfaction. Short in length, the tale describes a moment of awareness, but unfortunately not one of enlightenment: like Josef K.'s rude awakening, the trapeze artist becomes aware of his (first) suffering.

Ein Hungerkünstler focuses on the middle and endgame to suffering. Even though initially famed and lauded, the hunger artist cuts a dissatisfied figure. A downturn in circumstances then sets his life on a downward spiral, until he loses fame and celebrity and suffers an ignominious death. He has a momentary breakthrough of insight before his death, when he admits that his fasting was simply based on lacking appetising food. This realisation is a half-step on the path to enlightenment, and on a par with Josef K.'s 'zwanzig Händen'.

The two later stories from 1923/1924 have less distressing elements, while retaining evidence of how a self-absorbed outlook contributes to suffering. The tone is more constructive and the outcome less traumatic, as nobody dies and no tears are shed. There is no celebration, either, because that would undermine the overall argument that dualistic ideas of loss/gain, good/bad, happy/sad are ultimately unhelpful and usually harmful. In both cases the story is recounted through a first-person narrator who is not

(nominally at least) the hero, although they reveal much about themselves as the narrative unfolds. Through their first-hand accounts we witness the benefits of taking a detached (yet still engaged) view of how obstacles confront them. In each story the deluded figure is not the narrator, but a different individual (the little woman, Josefine) observed in the throes of ignorance-fuelled suffering.

In *Eine kleine Frau* the little woman is a mysterious figure with unknown motives, and the narrator is perplexed by her fixation with him. His sketchy account of her side of the story is in keeping with the premise that they are more or less strangers – he is not an omniscient narrator with access to her inner thoughts. However, he reveals much about himself in the way he treats the issue seriously and is concerned about her welfare. As a result, the reader is invited to distinguish between the little woman's confused (unskillful) suffering and the narrator's (skillful) attempts to shed light on the problem.

In *Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse*, the mouse narrator reveals little about himself specifically, but much about his people, which reflects back certain characteristics. By contrast, his subject, Josefine, is atypical and very different from the 'everymouse' figure he seems to represent. The narrator is speaking from a rare position of knowledge, because he has clearly known Josefine for a long time and is able to explain how she thinks and why she behaves the way she does. The effect of the narratorial stance in the last stories sets a tone of sympathetic understanding of the suffering of fellow creatures. The Buddha delayed entry into nirvana until he had contributed what he could to alleviating the lot of fellow human beings, by trying to cultivate insight into the nature of existence. This is not to say the first-person narrators are Buddha-like figures, but they do at least show a degree of enlightened detachment in the face of suffering, whether personal or linked to their species. In a significant departure from the usual suffering hero

in Kafka, they do not bemoan their lot and offer the standard ‘Why me?’ lament. On the contrary, they attempt to deal with the situation in a sensible manner. Here, ignorance and ‘self’-ishness are displayed by the third-person figures, and the first-person commentator supplies the gloss or background. By interweaving views of skillful and unskillful attitudes, Kafka can represent balanced and unbalanced lives, with the latter exposed to suffering and the former marked by equanimity.

In keeping with the methodology used in the preceding chapters, the collection will be examined from two angles: what messages emerge in the narrative tightropes and tripwires, as well as an assessment of the degree to which the main figures are sleepwalkers in suffering.

6.2 Tightropes and tripwires

*If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few.*³⁰²

As regards the illocutionary approach, the stories deliver messages in alignment with The Three Universal Characteristics, Dependent Origination and The Four Noble Truths. Suffering is evident throughout, and there are numerous references to key Buddhist terms such as impermanence, attachment, delusion and insight. There is textual evidence to support how the self is undermined and how attachment to illusory goals leads to suffering. In each story there are characters who struggle metaphorically to keep their lives in balance, as if walking a tightrope. The trapeze artist adds a further dimension in that he literally has to negotiate a high wire, but it is ironic that despite his professional prowess he is just as unable as his fellow sufferers to balance the demands of his desires with the realities of existence.

302 Shunryu Suzuki in Titmuss, p. 78.

In this collection Kafka employs many techniques to bring into relief the attitudes and assumptions which weigh down the individual and throw him off balance. All four stories set tripwires for characters and readers alike, exposing the true shifting nature of reality, as would a typical Zen koan. Three stories in the collection, apart from *Eine kleine Frau*, present situations that bear superficially little connection with everyday life: fasting, trapeze acts, mouse singing. Readers setting off at the outset of *Der Proceß* or *Das Schloß* might readily align themselves with noble quests (defending innocence, asserting rights) and end up backed into the same corner as the K.s, but they will not climb a trapeze, fast for forty days or become a prima donna community figurehead. But despite the contextual distance between reader and narrative experience, all the stories find a way to disturb readers and force them to reconsider the values they subscribe to.

6.2.1 *Erstes Leid*

*All becomes unsatisfactory because of grasping and clinging, and all is suffering equally.*³⁰³

Erstes Leid is marked by a poignancy that is rare in Kafka, which may be due to the fact that the sufferer does not inflict pain on those around him. Though clearly at fault because of his excessive (unbalanced) preoccupation with the tightrope, the trapeze artist comes closest to turning 'Leid' into 'Mitleid' by cutting a pathetic figure rather than an arrogant one. Where Josef K. abuses, K. mistreats and Georg Bendemann suppresses, the trapeze artist simply withdraws. But like the chains in Aphorism 66, his bid to reach the heights is thwarted by down-to-earth practicalities. This lack of balance leaves room for illocutionary and perlocutionary messages in the text.

303 Buddhadasa in Titmuss, p. 39.

From a Western perspective it is tempting to see the trapeze artist's excesses as the veneer on the main subject: art, or devotion to art.³⁰⁴ This would sit well given Kafka's declaration that he was himself made of literature. The problem is not exclusive devotion to one's art (Kafka's or the trapeze artist's), but one's appropriation of it to define identity.

Tightropes

The theme of suffering (*dukkha*) is established early on through the title, and the theme of attachment is addressed in the trapeze artist's single-minded quest for perfection. Just as there are 'Wächter' to watch over Josef K. and point him in the right direction, there are 'minders' to watch over the trapeze artist. However, these assistants are not as helpful as Josef K.'s warders, whose advice hints at action which would alleviate his suffering; the trapeze artist is surrounded by people catering to his every whim, like the impresario, and this means that his delusions are not challenged. In this case the 'wach' does not suggest wakefulness or enlightenment, but denotes attentive dedication to the trapeze artist without evaluating the wisdom of his demands.

Impermanence (*anicca*) is represented in the trapeze artist's world by the regular journeys made to other sites. No matter how hard his staff try to accommodate him and establish a comfortable environment, everything has to be dismantled and reassembled elsewhere. It is impossible to 'ungestört leben' (DL 318) and the artist fails to adjust, hence the consequences, described as 'lästig', 'Verlängerung seiner Leiden', 'peinlich' and 'zerstörend' (DL 318-319).³⁰⁵ A comic moment is provided in the way train trips are handled, with the trapeze artist riding in the luggage rack: this 'kläglichem Ersatz' for his

304 Ronald Gray suggests the story is about the artist's struggle for perfection (op. cit., p. 177), and Tauber links it with Kafka's autobiographical critique of his own obsessive perfectionism towards writing (p. 190).

305 The collection is published in Franz Kafka, *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, eds. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch and Gerhard Neumann (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994). All references will be taken from this edition and marked as DL, followed by the page number.

beloved trapeze epitomises the lengths to which people will go to preserve their attachments.

The stage set, the story then focuses on the relationship between the trapeze artist and one particular member of his crew, the impresario, who indulges his star performer's whims in the name of show business. The demand for a second trapeze indicates the artist's growing craving for perfection, and the impresario's prompt approval reveals his own deepening attachment to the artist. There is no insight on the part of the protagonists and the suffering created by these desires escalates. On this occasion, the impresario allays the trapeze artist's concerns, but the cost of pandering to craving is 'schwerer Sorge' (DL 321). The story ends with a burst of three questions which by their juxtaposition reflect the impresario's train of thought as he looks on at his charge: 'Wenn ihn einmal solche Gedanken zu quälen begannen, konnten sie je gänzlich aufhören? Mußten sie sich nicht immerfort steigern? Waren sie nicht existenzbedrohend?' (DL 321). He now fears that this quest for artistic perfection may spiral out of control into a life-threatening obsession. The pursuit of perfection per se is not necessarily 'wrong' in Buddhist thinking, but if this goal acquires personal significance and is associated with part or all of the individual's identity, the pursuit is misguided. It is clear from the trapeze artist's lament that pushing the limits of his art is what fuels his sense of self, and lack of artistic growth equates to starving the self of development. The trapeze artist breaks down when he perceives the limitations of his working environment, and this illustrates the Buddhist notion that craving feeds suffering in a perpetual cycle.³⁰⁶

After the trapeze artist has been comforted, he goes back to sleep, but this calm is 'scheinbar' (DL 321). The first 'Falten' have appeared on his

306 Ronald Gray feels Kafka 'was mocking his own solitude and seclusiveness' in the caricature of the trapeze artist's suffering (p. 178). This seems harsh and robs the story of any uplifting qualities.

‘glatter Kinderstirn’, indicating ejection from his self-absorbed comfort zone (where all his desires could be fulfilled) into unknown territory. The artist lives for and within his art, so there can be no dwelling in the past, using a single trapeze – ‘wie kann ich denn leben!’ (DL 320). The reference to a child’s appearance suggests the artist’s self is undergoing growing pains and expanding at a rate which his entourage cannot match. Here is a case of the self using art to inflate itself (egotistical), rather than the self giving itself up to art (detached). The story ends just as the self-conscious awareness of dissatisfaction starts to dawn, and like Josef K. he is ‘verhaftet’.

Tripwires

The two main characters advance unhappily along the personal tightropes of artistic obsession and paternal indulgence, but do not face any tripwires to bring them crashing back down to earth. The reader, on the other hand, observes the events from a safe distance on the ground, but is gradually drawn towards a point where a koan-style expression upsets expectations and triggers a reassessment.

Erstes Leid starts innocuously with the words ‘Ein Trapezkünstler’ and, apart from those familiar with the circus, readers can venture into the story safe in the knowledge that the context is ‘another world’ which has little impact on their own lives. The opening sentence continues to ‘soften up’ the reader by offering the uncontroversial view that the art of tightrope walking is ‘eine der schwierigsten’ (DL 317): so far, no uncomfortable self-engagement on the part of the reader. But the sentence then dangles bait designed to lure many an ego, describing how the trapeze artist is characterised by his ‘Streben nach Vervollkommnung’, and this pursuit will sound familiar and laudable for many Western readers, before the sentence ends with the hook: ‘aus tyrannisch gewordener Gewohnheit’ (DL 317).

The formulation of this opening line has perlocutionary value in the way it engages the reader and draws reaction. The opening phrases discuss artistry and lead into 'Vervollkommnung', a generally positive notion with no connection to suffering or selfhood. The trick comes by developing 'Streben' until it becomes 'Gewohnheit', hence the fixation.

The story continues on its path, setting out the dangers of being driven by self-oriented desires, and carrying in its wake those readers who would endorse the 'noble' pursuit of excellence. The opening paragraph even closes on a note designed to perpetuate the myth of perfection: the artist is an extraordinary performer and his supporters understand ('einsehen') his quest because it does not derive from base 'Mutwillen', but rather from loftier, more meaningful motives. In the later story, the hunger artist strives to uphold 'die Ehre seiner Kunst', and here the trapeze artist is applauded for a similar dedication: 'seine Kunst in ihrer Vollkommenheit bewahren' (DL 318). In this way, the absurd practice of deciding to live one's entire life on the high wire – in effect the artist's drastic attempt to define his singularity by merging 'art' and 'self' – is presented as noble, if idiosyncratic.

The second paragraph sustains the illusion of acceptability by describing the artist's day-to-day life on the wire as 'schön'. The opening 'Doch' concedes that his arrangement is difficult for all concerned, but the rest of the paragraph underlines his dedication and the support of his followers. Almost halfway into the story, there is no conflict yet and the pursuit of artistic perfection remains unchallenged, backed up by the Western idea of self-fulfilment through continuous development. However, 'Leid' is never far and the third paragraph introduces it in classic Buddhist fashion, through the inevitable truth of impermanence, 'unvermeidlichen Reisen' (DL 318). The artist lives a conditioned life dependent on a multitude of external factors, like

all other human beings, but life in his self-absorbed bubble cannot continue for ever under these controlled conditions.

The koan now shifts into absurdist mode, to show the risks of aligning incompatible entities, such as a finite, imperfect self and the notion of artistic perfection. The artist's reactions to change are both childish and childlike, as he makes pouting demands for a second trapeze, sobs at the thought of not getting what he wants and is eventually soothed to sleep. The impresario becomes a father figure concerned for the wellbeing of his child, moved by his tears. Even though he calms the agitated child/artist, he is faced with the nagging doubt that accompanies all attachments: the fear of losing possession of what one has.

The story ends by setting out a number of contrasts, to underline the idea that the suffering described originates from within the human self, and is not caused by a failure to reach 'targets'. The opening paragraph ends with admiration for the artist and his 'dauernder Übung' (DL 318), but we close with a different image of something everlasting: troubled thoughts of inadequacy. It is not just the quest for perfection which knows no bounds, for the impresario may now wonder if the artist's tortured thoughts will also 'immerfort steigern' (DL 321).

Erstes Leid covers ground familiar to Buddhism in the way it explores suffering and selfhood linked by fixations. It adds a perlocutionary layer to the overt textual message by twisting the notion of perfection from a noble cause to a misguided pursuit, but the absurd extremes to the artist's behaviour make this an unsubtle koan, and therefore unlikely to unsettle the reader in the way *Der Proceß* does.

6.2.2 *Eine kleine Frau*

*He who knows, does not speak; he who speaks does not know.*³⁰⁷

The theme of balance is just as well represented in the introspective ruminations of *Eine kleine Frau* as it is in the highwire exploits of *Erstes Leid*. The narrator's mindfulness is impressive as he faces an irrational threat which refuses to go away. To his credit, he does not slide into an obsessive battle against the little woman, as Josef K. and K. do against their adversaries, but he is prepared to examine himself, in case he has contributed to the situation. This degree of flexibility and openmindedness is rare in Kafka, and a shining example of how to combat suffering by reducing the personal stake in it.

Tightropes

The whole of the opening paragraph contains an uncharacteristically (for Kafka) detailed description of the little woman of the title, but this is important because it sets the scene for the rest of the story. We have a first-person narrator and the physical (external) description of the woman underlines the fact that he does not know what is going on inside her head. He can report on the outside manifestations, but he can only speculate as to the psychological or emotional causes of the woman's behaviour.

The theme of suffering (The First Noble Truth) appears in the second paragraph: '[sie] ist mit mir sehr unzufrieden' (DL 322). This is, however, no ordinary instance of suffering because it is repeated several times in the same sentence, passing from the irritating 'immer geschieht ihr Unrecht von mir', through the more serious 'ich ärgere sie auf Schritt und Tritt', until the life-encompassing 'jedes Teilchen meines Lebens [wäre] für sie ein Ärgernis' (DL 322).

307 Humphreys, *Zen Buddhism*, p. 160.

This defines the extent of the suffering but not the cause, and as often happens with Kafka the hidden trigger drives the narrative. The narrator clearly has no idea of the reason for the little woman's unhappiness, which causes him to suffer, but he does explore the notion of 'Beziehung', which recalls the Law of Dependent Origination: everything must originate from a cause. Without a connection (attachment), there should not be any suffering and by trying to find the link with his accuser, the narrator is pursuing an enlightened approach to the problem, indicated by words such as 'erkenne' and 'bewußt' (DL 323). He is looking for the source of the suffering in order that it can be ceased, 'alles Leid wäre offenbar vorüber' (DL 323). He cannot find the cause in himself, so he wonders whether the woman would then be in a position to end the suffering, simply by forgetting he existed. If the 'attachment' is purely on her part, she would unilaterally have the power to end the suffering.

This situation of inexplicable suffering evokes *Der Proceß*, for we have in effect an accused without a charge. The first-person narrator has been singled out for censure by the little woman, but no reason is given. She is quite a sketchy figure, in the mould of the Court or the Castle, a mysterious force which is able to impose by applying pressure to the most sensitive point – the self's sense of worth. The similarities are balanced out by significant differences, however: the narrator does not assume, for example, that he is innocent but accepts this possibility as an option. He may inadvertently have offended her, or she may have over-reacted or mistaken him for somebody else.

The outcome nevertheless is suffering and he must deal with it. Suffering is always personal, and the way to defuse it is to cut off the oxygen supply to the self. By displaying less attachment and defensiveness regarding his self, the narrator is able to pursue a number of solutions to the problems created

by this troubled relationship: approaching the woman directly, considering his own behaviour, asking advice from a close friend, and sounding out public opinion.³⁰⁸

As well as displaying a good sense of self-awareness, the narrator touches on the crux of the matter: suffering only assumes meaning when filtered through the self – it takes a ‘me’, a ‘person’ to experience suffering. He arrives at this idea when he argues that the little woman is not concerned about him, but is entirely focused on ‘ihr persönliches Interesse’ (DL 323). In this respect, he knows how to help her end the suffering and tries to alert her to the best way of doing this, but her ‘Aufwallung’ (DL 323) at his suggestion that she take this less personally reveals the extent of her self-defensiveness. The narrator’s well-intentioned advice marks him out as a ‘Wächter’ to the little woman’s ‘Josef K.’, as if Kafka had revisited the arrest scene and presented it from a different viewpoint.

The narrator goes on to explain how the little woman has boxed herself into an awkward position: she is too proud to admit publicly that his mere existence is tormenting her, but she is suffering too much to say nothing. Her case appears to be one of self-delusion, and she is in complete thrall to the whims of her self: ‘so täuscht sie sich’ (DL 325).³⁰⁹ She is driven by ‘die Leidenschaft des Kampfes’, which is etched into her features, ‘die verdrießlich aufgestülpten Lippen’ and ‘dieses um meinetwillen vergränte Gesicht’ (DL 328).

This is in stark contrast to the narrator, who is able to reflect on his situation and consider all his options, even the unpalatable ones. He reasons that it would be difficult to count on public support and force the woman to

308 Tauber, however, is unimpressed by the narrator’s ‘prolix reflections’, which contribute to the ‘tasteless mass of detail’ in the text (p. 189).

309 ‘Täuscht’ recalls the chaplain’s warning to Josef K. (DP 292) and Olga’s words about Barnabas (DS 285).

back down – the only option is for him to change and adapt to the situation. This ability, lacking in virtually all Kafka's protagonists, save the later K., is highly significant and shows a departure from the usual entrenched self-preoccupation against all better judgment.

In other words, the narrator shows less attachment to self; he does not crave peace, or a solution, or happiness, but is more pragmatic. The problem has arisen and although its cause is a mystery this does not deflect the narrator from dealing with the matter in an even-tempered way. He is not unemotional, as he is clearly upset and troubled by the situation, but the disturbance is the backdrop to his decisions and not the driver.

The narrator has clearly given much thought to the question of how this suffering can be ceased. Josef K. always looks for solutions externally, having decided that internally there is no fault and nothing needs to be done. This is why he fails, but the narrator in *Eine kleine Frau* rejects the solutions which entail external action and settles on a path of introspection. If he cannot influence the behaviour or resolve of the little woman and considers it would be dangerous to depend on the support of neutrals, he concludes that the best option is to deal with the hurt he feels.

The narrator focuses on his own actions and tries to see how far they are rooted in self-interest. His reflections tell him that any developments he has seen over the years are not material changes, but are more likely shifts in his perception of the situation. As his powers of insight become 'ruhiger' (DL 330), he is even able to reconcile himself to the fact that there may never be an 'Entscheidung' and this unwarranted suffering may last.

He admits that such a prospect has unsettled him, and it is not humanly possible to remain unaffected by the 'Grundlosigkeit des Ärgers' (DL 332). However, where the K.s raged defiantly against perceived injustice, the narrator here can turn a blind eye to the woman's fury and 'ungestört von der

Welt, mein bisheriges Leben ruhig [...] fortsetzen' (DL 333). To the Buddhist way of thinking, the ability to lead an untroubled life in the midst of suffering shows supreme insight and marks out the narrator as a rare example of a fully enlightened character in Kafka's work. The trapeze artist is knocked off balance by the intrusion of the real world into his life, but the narrator here has found a way to live 'ungestört'.

Tripwires

The koan effect works well when it touches a raw nerve, such as an apparently unjustified attack causing unmerited suffering, and this is the situation which confronts the reader in this text. Whereas in *Der Proceß* Kafka explored the descent into 'self'-defence through Josef K. sinking deeper into the quicksands of attachment, in *Eine kleine Frau* he examines the option of walking away, which is a development echoing the closing stages of *Das Schloß*, when K. draws back from the brink. In this respect, the story begins like *Der Proceß*, but ends like *Das Schloß*.

The opening perlocutionary salvo is fired in a typically Zen formulation: familiar ground into which an unexpected oddity is introduced. Here, a seemingly innocuous description of a woman follows the unprepossessing story title, launching the narrative in muted tones – no beetle transformations or bed-and-arrest scenes here. The unremarkable account of the little woman lurches into koan mode with the impression her hand makes on the narrator – it is quite like no other hand he has ever seen, but at the same time has no distinguishing features: 'es ist eine völlig normale Hand' (DL 322).

The hand is never mentioned again, making this otherwise 'ordinary' paragraph one of the more bizarre entries in Kafka's work. In some ways, in koan style, it can be seen as an attempt to trigger in the reader the sensation of randomness and incongruity, similar to something unfolding in the

narrative. The second paragraph introduces the theme of undeserved punishment, and we read how the narrator is confused and upset by the apparent suffering he has unwittingly caused a stranger. As readers, we do not 'suffer' on hearing about the exceptionally normal hand, but we are left puzzled by the contradiction. In some ways, the narrator's view of the woman's hand mirrors her view of his character – there is something peculiar which draws the attention, but it cannot be defined.

Thus, the story opens in koan style, but there is otherwise little at stake personally for the reader. The narrator has not introduced himself yet, so no 'bonding' can take place. Similarly, the little woman is described physically, but we do not know what she is thinking, so the story progresses without 'hooked' readers.

This is not to say that there is no perlocutionary activity, but the narrative plays with assumptions of logic and juxtaposition by weaving through contradictory and misleading statements. Initially, the degree of suffering inflicted on the woman is described as 'Unrecht' and 'Ärgernis'; furthermore, 'mag sein' (DL 322) reveals how the narrator can only speculate on the reason for the problem. However, his guesswork proves frustratingly unhelpful because he covers such a wide range of possibilities: it may be the way he looks (affects her 'Schönheitssinn'), or the way he behaves (offends her 'Gerechtigkeitsgefühl'), or he may have upset some connection with her past ('Überlieferungen'), present ('Gewohnheiten') or future ('Hoffnungen'). In other words, no stone has been left unturned and a universe of potential causes for her unhappiness is possible.

In addition to the narrator's open mind regarding the origins of the problem, the stance he adopts vis-à-vis the little woman is thoughtful and measured and he is not afraid to do things which 'go against the grain': in short, he is not governed by self-interest and is able to consider a broader

perspective. The tension between instinctive reaction (such as a self-defence mechanism) and a meditative approach is recreated by the narrator's vacillations and reservations before making the enlightened choice. The reader must plough through the twists and turns with him and cannot settle. The path to clearheadedness is not smooth, and is more than likely littered with traps. The narrator's suffering seeps through the drawn-out ruminations, and the reader is carried along on the same journey.

At one point, for example, the narrator maintains that the little woman will not be able to enlist the support of the public against him, but then goes on to say that he cannot rest easily. This is because he struggles to feign sympathy for her self-imposed torment and this will count against him in the court of public opinion. The narrator later concludes that he must be the one to change, given her intransigence, and his initial efforts bring him some cheer, until he crashes into the brick wall of her dissatisfaction. He then consults a close friend who suggests the solution is simple: run away. The problem is straightforward, but not that clear-cut, and we are told that running away would be a very bad thing to do: as a form of desire (to flee), it would create significant negative karma. In his final thoughts, he suggests that the general public may hold him in high regard ('achtungswertes Mitglied', DL 332), but this notion fails to comfort him. Instead, his disquiet seems to grow with age, despite his intellect telling him there is nothing to worry about. The final, contradictory, word finishes on an upswing, as the narrator claims he will be able to lead a quiet life, untroubled by external affairs, 'trotz allen Tobens der Frau' (DL 333).

It is as if the little woman is a koan in human form, in the manner of the assistants sent to 'distract' K. They failed in their mission because K. resisted and tried to break them down; the narrator here, however, does not try to 'solve' the conundrum of the little woman but examines himself instead. As a

tightrope walker shifts his weight to stay upright, the narrator adjusts his views and assumptions to maintain equilibrium, and steps over the tripwires where necessary.

6.2.3 *Ein Hungerkünstler*

Great doubt: great awakening.

Little doubt: little awakening.

*No doubt: no awakening.*³¹⁰

Ein Hungerkünstler is the second story in the collection chronologically speaking, and it has given rise to discussions on the role of the artist in society, studies in self-righteousness, and allusions to religious themes. Relevant to a dissertation examining the perils of attachment as a cause of suffering, the story exudes ignorance in the figure of the harmless, misunderstood but ultimately deluded hunger artist. Riven by contradictions, he is passive towards those around him, but aggressive in his 'art': his most violent expressions come when he is defending his fasting/self, for his art is the vehicle in which he defines himself.

Tightropes

The Universal Characteristic of impermanence courses through the whole story and is particularly prevalent in the opening lines, peppered with terms such as 'früher', 'damals', 'andere Zeiten' (DL 333-334). Interest in the art of fasting has fallen away to the extent that the buzz of its halcyon days is just a memory. The folly of trying to resist the passage of time is hinted at in the reactions of adults and children to the hullabaloo surrounding the hunger artist: while the younger ones are spellbound by the spectacle, the grown-ups often treat it as 'ein Spaß' and follow it 'der Mode halber' (DL 334). The story of *Ein Hungerkünstler* is of slavery to a fashion.

310 Stephen Batchelor in Titmuss, p. 116.

Suffering is clear in both physical and spiritual senses. The emaciated body with its 'vortretenden Rippen' (DL 334) is a picture of unhealthiness, and the misery is palpable. There are interesting parallels with the life of the Buddha, who spent years as an ascetic in his search for enlightenment before finally giving up this method as deluded. Here, however, the hunger artist does not give up but keeps going, and in the end it is only lack of time that stops him from fasting further. It is also ironic that the hunger artist does not understand why he is fasting. The Buddha realised that asceticism was misguided and self-ish, broke his fast with a meal, earning the disdain of other ascetics, but setting off on the path to insight. The Buddha understood the nature of emptiness and not-self, and realised that the self cannot be destroyed or starved to death, but rather needs to be 'discredited'. The self is left to exist in its temporary, shifting guises, but loses its power as the force which dictates individual behaviour. The hunger artist does not have this insight and continues blindly to the end when he crumbles under the burden of the quest to find 'die Speise' which would satisfy him.

The hunger artist walks the narrowest of tightropes because of all Kafka's creations he has the clearest view of where he is headed. This is in essence his problem: his lack of doubt. The story is a masterstroke as it questions the value and purpose of knowledge and achievement, traditional pillars of the Western way of life. To improve our lot, we strive to learn more, to go further, to probe more deeply. The hunger artist epitomises this stance, relentlessly pushing the boundaries of experience: can I fast another day? This only succeeds in perpetually moving the destination, adding another link to a growing chain. As the ascetic Buddha realised, this pursuit is carried out in the name of the self.

The mental suffering undergone by the hunger artist is much more pronounced than the physical hardships. Words such as 'quälend', 'trübselig'

and 'entsetzlich schwer' (DL 335) testify to the torment he faces, not through resistance of food, but less tangible matters such as slurs on his integrity. There is the irony of the 'Wächter' (Kafka's stories have a lot of them), who are engaged to keep a close eye on the hunger artist and make sure he does not eat, but he ends up keeping a closer watch on them, making sure that they do not look away. This is truly what saddens him for he genuinely does fast uninterruptedly, but can never fully convince the watching public of his feats.³¹¹ His 'Ehre' is at stake, and where honour is invoked the self is not far behind: with this claim the hunger artist's self-ishness makes its entrance into the story and remains stubbornly centre stage until he is swept away as a bag of bones at the close.

The trapeze artist in the earlier story was equally driven by the impossible goal of perfection, but he could at least practise dutifully in the vain attempt to marry up his reach and his grasp. The hunger artist shows a clever converse to his obsessive cousin, because he is actually already in possession of perfection throughout his fasting, but it is his task not to let go. The added complication for him is his playing to the gallery: he knows his fasting is 'pure', but nobody else can observe 'ununterbrochen' (DL 337) to verify this achievement. The challenge is to convert the inactivity of 'not eating' into a sideshow, which is tantamount to attempting to enact or stage 'emptiness'. No other human being can be his permanent companion, so his task is not really to fast for forty days but to keep public interest alive for forty days and beyond. His attempts to do so are characterised by humorous touches, as we see the hunger artist singing through the night to 'prove' that he is not eating, only for the guards to wonder at the ventriloquist skills which enable him to drink and sing at the same time. His efforts to reward the

311 Tauber notes that the hunger artist's achievements are 'unattested' and he 'suffers from the fact that he finds no reliable witness' (p. 192).

‘Wächter’ with a hearty breakfast after keeping pace with him all night are also in vain: onlookers merely interpret the lavish treat as ‘ungebührliche Beeinflussung’ (DL 336).

Between them, the hunger artist and trapeze artist demonstrate the impossibility of chasing absolutes: the former fasts perfectly, but cannot sustain it permanently; the latter perfects difficult routines, but once completed they cannot be repeated and must be escalated in complexity. While the trapeze artist commands the full support and respect of his staff, he struggles to control the demands of his ego; conversely, the hunger artist is totally satisfied with his fasting prowess, but he is doomed to hunger after the respect of his public.³¹² In both cases, suffering turns on unquenchable desire, The Second Noble Truth.

The hunger artist is true to his name, as he is the embodiment of hunger, but it is not food he lacks: he craves admiration and in this respect he can never be fulfilled. Even at the height of his fame, questions surface about the validity of his fasting. His hunger for attention and recognition substitute for his discontent: he parades his natural lack of appetite as an art, but he is deluding himself and his audience because fasting is actually ‘die leichteste Sache von der Welt’ (DL 337) – if he cannot even admire his own feats, how can he expect others to do so? This is the reason for his ‘Unzufriedenheit mit sich selbst’ (DL 337). He can never reconcile his thirst for recognition for his art, and the realisation that his fasting is more artifice than art.

The hunger artist is held back by the limitations of others. His handlers set the fasting time at a maximum of forty days, an artificial ceiling which draws Biblical comparisons. The hunger artist believes he can fast through all barriers and is being cheated of his rightful accolades, but where Christ

312 Politzer comments that ‘without (public) acknowledgment perfection will forever be imperfect’ (p. 305).

suffered in the desert and resisted temptation, the hunger artist does what comes naturally. The sideshow that is put on for the public, in other words, is precisely a 'show' and inauthentic. The crowds might go away satisfied by the spectacle, but the star performer cannot. The hunger artist lives 'in scheinbarem Glanz' (DL 341), feted by the world but to his own mind unappreciated. He would break out into a rage when being misrepresented to the crowds, with his fury attributed to hunger-driven 'Reizbarkeit'. This 'Verdrehung der Wahrheit' (DL 342) would send the hunger artist sighing back into the straw at the injustice, but it could equally be argued that his whole life is 'twisting the truth' because his effortless fasting is not pushing the boundaries of human endurance, but simply the height of indulgence.

The Third Noble Truth concerns cessation of craving, but here there is only evidence of perpetuation of ignorance. The main driver in the narrative is the 'Umschwung' (DL 342, *anicca* or impermanence) which is the force behind all the external changes in the hunger artist's life. Ironically, the decline in interest in fasting satisfies the artist's wants, while preparing new frustrations elsewhere. It is unfortunate for him that he cannot command centre stage any more and is out of the limelight. The advantage, however, is that the artificial forty day fasting limit need no longer be enforced, because nobody is paying attention; the disadvantage is that the increased fasting will not be witnessed or celebrated. On joining the circus as a freelance, unshackled from the forty-day chains of the previous management, the hunger artist vows to astound his audience, but he fails to grasp that these are different times and the earlier spark of public interest has now faded. Similarly, the hunger artist looked forward to the new visitors to his booth, before finally realising his cage was merely 'ein Hindernis auf dem Weg zu den Ställen' (DL 346), not the destination. The hunger artist can never square the circle because his hunger

for external recognition (his 'Lebenszweck', DL 345) and inner dissatisfaction with the ease of fasting can never be reconciled.

The hunger artist's suffering continues because he cannot move with the times. He joins the circus, but ends up in a different location with a different dynamic, and the relationship between his 'sideshow' and public expectations alters dramatically. He still craves attention, but whereas before all eyes were on him, now they are drawn to his shabby surroundings. The greatest irony and insult, and the final hammer blow to his pride, is the board counting days fasted – it is no longer kept up-to-date and passers-by are in turns amused and unimpressed by the low figure. The talk is of a swindle, when in fact the hunger artist has fasted beyond all his previous achievements. The hunger artist's self-delusion reaches its apogee in his demand for respect: 'die Welt betrog ihn um seinen Lohn' (DL 347). This is clearly ironic retribution for the swindle that he keeps hidden, the fact that his fasting is born of necessity and not skill or effort.

The Fourth Noble Truth sets out the path to avoidance of suffering, but in this story the hunger artist dies in ignorance. There is regret and an admission that he had lived a lie, but there is no enlightenment. The pride has gone from his convictions, but he must continue to fast for he has still not succeeded in finding 'die Speise [...] die mir schmeckt' (DL 349).³¹³ The word 'schmeckt' smacks of pleasure and happiness, but for Buddhists the most revealing term is 'mir': it is personal. With the self in control, we cannot extricate ourselves from a life of wants and suffering.

After he dies, the 'Aufseher' calls for 'Ordnung' (DL 349), and the arrival of the panther hints at the way to a healthier outlook, in spite of the limits of physical incarceration. The hunger artist was in an unlocked cage, but refused

313 Ronald Gray takes this loss of pride as a sign of 'some spiritual progress' (p. 180).

to leave, almost mentally imprisoned within his craving. The panther is locked up with no means of escape but is the picture of health, suggesting that freedom from mental attachments leads to avoidance of suffering.

This animal is 'edel' and spectators flock to see the lifeforce streaming from its entire being. In an interesting twist, the hunger artist longed his whole life for devoted attention which he could never guarantee, whereas the panther inadvertently attracts a public that cannot break its stare. The draw appears to be the panther's natural free spirit or 'Freude am Leben' (DL 349), a quality carried in its powerful body and teeth; this contrasts with the hunger artist's emaciated figure and unemployed mouth, as well as his utter lack of 'Freude am Leben'. The hunger artist and the panther are both driven by wants: the difference is that the panther appears to have a 'healthy' appetite – it is clear and open, it sits in his jaws as a thirst for meat. The hunger artist's want is intellectually determined – he 'thinks too much', as Zen master Seung Sahn might have said.

In its own way, the panther offers a metamorphosis of hunger, a 'Verwandlung' truer to Buddhist ideas than that undergone by Gregor Samsa. The hunger artist's raging thirst for satisfaction creates intense karmic energy, represented symbolically by the big cat, but the spectators lining up in awe outside its cage are there to observe raw nature in its most intense incarnation. The human hunger artist offers intensity, but expressed as lack. His self-ish longing for an unidentified source of satisfaction is a figurative, psychological version of the panther's literal hunger. The circus would impress few spectators by counting the successive days in which the wild creature filled its stomach, and similarly the hunger artist fails to engage interest beyond a certain point by counting days of fasting. The spectacle of the panther's ravenous appetite is its irresistibility – its force defines the creature; the ultimate failure of the hunger artist lies in the self-determined source of

the intensity – his continued hungering depends on the peculiar characteristics of his own self. The panther's hunger is natural and uncalculated, emanating from its 'Gebiß' rather than its 'Gehirn', thus there are no mental strings attached to its desires.

The panther – unlike the hunger artist – is not after acclaim or admiration, but just wants food.³¹⁴ Its self is not defined in relation to others, but an amalgam of instincts, needs and wants – a perpetual seething mass of desires, but they come, get satisfied and pass. They are not retained as part of a willed, conscious definition of an all-embracing selfhood. The panther devours its meat without reflection, not conscious of the public, but the hunger artist is uncomfortable fasting out of public view because he needs accreditation.

The hunger artist cuts a sad figure because he does not understand – he has lived his life in accordance with a particular principle, which raises fasting to a fine art. He is happy to dedicate (ultimately sacrifice) his life to this end, and this is how the suffering results. A Judaeo-Christian reading might admire his steadfast disregard for creature comforts in order to transcend earthly limitations. Felix Greß suggests as much as he interprets the hunger artist's fasting as a bid for freedom: 'Der Preis für den möglichen Übergang in die Transzendenz ist die Selbstzerstörung.'³¹⁵ But this iron 'Willen zur Freiheit' is counterproductive to Buddhist thinking, for it is born of selfhood and desire, and hence can only cause suffering.

Tripwires

A koan works best when there is engagement on the part of the reader or listener. The topic of fasting will draw few devotees, but the hunger artist's

314 Tauber also sees a positive note in the panther which is self-oriented in its needs, but in a natural, instinctive way, through its 'unquestioning affirmation of life' (p. 193).

315 Greß, p. 106.

frustrated thirst for admiration allows identification on a general level for paradoxes and contradictions to have some effect.

The irony and humour in the narrative reinforce the thematic messages critical of attachment, but they also serve to undermine the reader's assumptions and value judgments. The story is shot through with a stream of contrasts which disorient the reader. Is the hunger artist a martyr to his art? Or is his suffering pointless? Is his fasting even 'art'? Has he been cheated of acclaim? Or is he the fraud? The narrator shuttles between extreme positions, reporting the frustrations of the hero, but seasoning the sympathy with gentle mocking, which leaves the reader in a halfway house.

A slippery area in the text centres on the notions of honour and fraud, two aspects of selfhood: we strive to present a public face to a certain specification, editing out unwanted elements. We hear very quickly about the hunger artist's integrity and how he goes to great lengths to prove he does not break his fast and swindle his public. However, he has also talked honestly of how easy it is to refuse food, and this raises accusations of deception – it is either a trick or an illusion on his part to make fasting look easy, or he simply never gets hungry. If the latter is true, can his refusal of food actually count as fasting? His final confession would suggest that he has a guilty conscience about this. Ironically, he does not suffer through hunger, but that is what the crowd would like to see, his resolve in the face of pain and adversity.

The hunger artist complains of a 'Verdrehung der Wahrheit' and this description can be applied to koans, too. On a couple of occasions, the hunger artist is presented to the public in a way which is opposite to his intentions. The whole performance marking the end of the fast is carefully stage-managed, and the impresario even gives his skeletal performer a sneaky shake to suggest he is weak from the long hungry period. Similarly, when the hunger artist snaps after another comment by an onlooker that his 'trüber Laune' (DL

341) is attributed to not eating, he rattles the cage like a wild animal, foreshadowing the panther which is about to take his place. This is an authentic outburst and not 'for show', but the impresario ironically calms the man down by declaring the same thing that initially annoyed the hunger artist.

Another perlocutionary technique is the use of questions and exclamations in the text. The narrator raises a number of issues in the story: some reflect the hunger artist's thinking, in 'erlebte Rede', such as his lament that the public imagination cannot stretch beyond forty days; others are rhetorical devices which give a more informal feel to the text and draw the reader in towards a particular answer, before revealing the inherent contradiction or conflict.

The question 'Was sollte nun der Hungerkünstler tun?' (DL 343) comes at the first major crossroads in his life, as public opinion begins to change. He leaves his impresario for the circus in the first stage of a downward spiral. The next eruptions from the text betray the growing desperation of the hunger artist: he loses faith in the ability of the public to appreciate his art, 'was war ihnen Hungern?' (DL 346), and his own ability to explain it, 'Versuche, jemandem die Hungerkunst zu erklären!' (DL 347). The hunger artist's incredulity at the forty day fasting restriction is indicated by repeating the question: 'Warum gerade jetzt nach vierzig Tagen aufhören? Er hätte es noch lange, unbeschränkt lange ausgehalten; warum gerade jetzt aufhören, wo er im besten, ja noch nicht einmal im besten Hungern war?' (DL 338-339).

6.2.4 Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse

For a man to think he was born for the sake of name and fame is a tragedy. A glance at this thing known as prestige shows it to be thoroughly insubstantial. It

*depends on other people having a high regard for one; and it may well be that, though no one realises it, this high regard is quite unfounded.*³¹⁶

As well as being Kafka's final story, *Josefine* is special in its attempt to show both sides of the attachment/detachment issue. In *Josefine* there is a discontented figure who struggles to endure suffering in the manner of K. or the hunger artist: her public simply does not understand her needs or her art. In the narrator there is a more enlightened soul who endures suffering with a stoic resolve, in the manner of the narrator in *Eine kleine Frau* or post-Bürger K. It is unusual to see both sides of the suffering conundrum fleshed out in such detail. Although the mouse narrator's voice dominates the text with his temperate views, the twin billing shows how the story 'adds the countertheme of society to Kafka's exploration of the heroine's character and destiny'.³¹⁷

Tripwires

Josefine is often a bewildering account, with many questions posed by the narrator and numerous qualifications and counter-arguments which are difficult to follow. It is an uncomfortable read, with a 'choppy' narrative that is always going back on itself and leaving the reader disoriented. The quick succession of tripwires challenges the reader to keep up with the information presented and mirrors the dilemmas felt by the mouse folk: how to accommodate *Josefine* despite her foibles.

The textual incongruities and contradictions might be viewed as 'poor' writing, but they could also be seen as a Zen masterstroke. Ronald Gray feels the writing lacks structure and direction and is a challenge to logic.³¹⁸ Rather than a shortcoming, this would be seen as a success from the Zen viewpoint, for it unseats traditional logic and offers a glimpse of the 'real' world of flux

316 Buddhadasa in Titmuss, p. 211.

317 Politzer sees a balance in the tale, evidenced by the twin billing (pp. 308-09).

318 Ronald Gray, p. 176.

and non-fixed entities. Kafka recreates in the text the sense of danger and unease which underlie life in a community where threats are natural. In no way indicative of substandard writing, the complicated passages could conceivably represent the pinnacle of Kafka's perlocutionary expression.

From the very beginning, the title is confusing because it creates a doubt about who the story is about, Josefine or the mouse folk, represented by the first-person narrator. The opening paragraph follows up this ambivalence with multiple shifts in its stance vis-à-vis Josefine's importance. The first words announce her role as singer, sending out a clear message as to her status among the folk and the way in which she is identified. Also, the use of the possessive 'unsere' suggests that there is only one singer who can occupy the role, like a poet laureate. Thus Josefine is effectively introduced to the reader in a positive light. This perception must be heightened by the second line which associates her song with 'Macht'. The third line takes her reputation to an even higher level, by describing the effect of her song on the listener – 'fortreißen' (DL 350). However, from this lofty position of artistic excellence, Josefine's bubble of perfection is popped when the narrator announces that the mice folk do not like music: their tough lives afford little time to enjoy such a luxury and they much prefer peace and quiet. The reader experiences an abrupt fall, the first in a long series of koan-like about-faces which make this story both impenetrable and effective.

The reader is halfway to the end of the paragraph when the comment 'Stiller Frieden ist uns die liebste Musik' (DL 350) detonates its enigmatic time bomb: how can 'peace' or 'quiet' be classed as music? In classic koan style, the idiomatic phrase is crystal-clear in its message that the mice love peace, but it is merely masquerading as meaningful, because it soon becomes apparent that the story will revolve around the interpretation of music, and how can silence be musical? The tale is not entitled 'Josefine, the silence maker'.

The narrator continues with his characterisation of the mice folk as ‘unmusikalisch’ (DL 350-351), with the singular exception of Josefine. This could prompt a reader investigation into how it might be possible that the mice appreciate Josefine’s singing, if they are effectively tone-deaf? The narrator wonders how the mice can understand her song and responds with a simple answer: her singing is of such beauty that even ‘der stumpfste Sinn’ (DL 351) would recognise it. But the combination of ‘verstehen’ and ‘Schönheit’ seems an odd mix of the rational and the aesthetic, and the narrator feels this answer could only be satisfactory if the mice sensed ‘das Gefühl des Außerordentlichen’ (DL 351). Predictably, this answer is then rejected, as it is widely accepted ‘im vertrauten Kreise’ that Josefine is not a special talent.

The narrator tries again with a second question which approaches the problem from the opposite direction. Instead of asking what the mice make of Josefine, the question focuses on Josefine and whether she can actually sing at all. This is an astounding volte-face, given the story’s opening barely two paragraphs earlier, when she was introduced as ‘our singer’ and her voice possessed ‘Macht’.

The earlier statement that mice are not musical suggests that they are not in a position to answer the question, but now the narrator qualifies the unmusical aspect of rodent nature by revealing a musical tradition, so perhaps the mice do after all have an idea of what music is. However, before the reader can adjust to this sudden admission of a musical legacy, it seems the mice still cannot recognise anything special in Josefine: ‘Eine Ahnung dessen, was Gesang ist, haben wir also und dieser Ahnung entspricht Josefinens Kunst eigentlich nicht’ (DL 351).

The question is then raised a third time, strengthened by a follow-up question wondering whether Josefine’s singing is actually ‘nur ein Pfeifen’ (DL 351). This is another astounding leap from the initial ‘Macht’ argument,

because Josefine's powerful art has now been reduced to the squeak any mouse can make, without needing any kind of skill. This alters the perception of Josefine radically because she now begins to resemble the hunger artist, seeking acclaim for doing something which takes no effort. This is discussed as 'Schwindel' in *Ein Hungerkünstler*, and alluded to in similar terms here: 'Alle pfeifen wir, aber freilich denkt niemand daran, das als Kunst auszugeben' (DL 352). The transformation from figurehead to fraud has been swift and sudden, in the best koan manner.³¹⁹

But the narrative's twists and turns have only just started. Not content with swapping the initial 'Macht des Gesanges' for ordinary whistling, it is suggested that even 'Erdarbeiter' (DL 352) can whistle better than she can: the talismanic singer is outperformed by labourers. At rock bottom, with her art in tatters, the narrator now tries to pick Josefine off the floor and reinstate some of the earlier mystique surrounding her: 'Es ist aber eben doch nicht nur Pfeifen' (DL 352). Before the reader prepares for something positive to be said about her, however, we are told that from a distance or in a group, her singing is inconspicuous. Up close it is a different matter, but in order to discern her talent it is necessary 'sie nicht nur zu hören sondern auch zu sehn' (DL 352). This is another standalone koan-style line which sits squarely in the Zen tradition of 'what is the sound of one hand clapping', but here it is modified slightly to run 'what does a whistle look like?'

This is brief respite for Josefine because the narrator then compares her ordinary whistling to somebody cracking nuts and passing it off as art. This would clearly be ridiculous, but the narrator nevertheless discusses what might happen if the 'nut cracker' were to pull off such a feat. This now hints at a defence of Josefine, offering to explain how the star performer's mediocre nut

319 Ronald Gray finds 'too many sudden twists of direction', which make the story a 'document of neurosis' rather than a work of art (pp. 176-77).

cracking might be a more effective way of communicating the activity by making the ordinary seem remarkable in some respect.

As this tortuous passage comes to an end, we get a closer look at Josefine the person. She refuses to accept that her 'Kunst' or 'Gesang' is the same as whistling. Reminiscent of the hunger artist, Josefine craves admiration and acknowledgement, but on her terms. The hunger artist lives for the acclaim of a public which does not 'get' his art, and now Josefine counts on the devotion of the mouse folk, but it is the wrong kind of devotion, and affords her no satisfaction. She might try to improve her singing in order to earn the accolades properly or educate her public (justice); but from a Buddhist angle, she should work on reducing her dependency on accolades, deserved or not (attachment).

The narrator now shifts his attention to what happens during Josefine's performances and prepares more puzzles for the reader. Mice folk usually whistle when they are happy and might therefore be expected to whistle during her shows, but on the contrary we are told the auditorium is 'mäuschenstill' (DL 354). The claim that mice whistle when they are happy also seems to contradict the narrator's earlier assertion that they are at their happiest when things are quiet. This prepares the ground for the next koan conundrum which turns on the notion of sound and silence: the narrator wonders if the mice are enchanted by Josefine's song or the silence encompassing it. But if Josefine is singing, how can there be silence? Silence can be defined as the 'absence' of sound, so the two are mutually exclusive. The narrator explains how a little mouse innocently started to whistle along during one of Josefine's shows, and was hushed by the rest of the audience for disturbing 'die feierliche Stille' (DL 354), rather than the song.

After the repeated contrasts between Josefine's special status and her level of talent, the narrator then raises the question on many readers' lips:

‘Was treibt das Volk dazu, sich für Josefine so zu bemühen?’ (DL 357). The question relates to her singing rather than her character, with the mouse people ‘bedingungslos ergeben’ (DL 358) to her. The narrator rejects this, however, and states that the mouse folk are not beholden to anybody and it is precisely this fiercely independent quality which Josefine fights against.

True to the pattern of the story, the disclaimer is not long coming: within a breath of declaring that ‘bedingungslose Ergebenheit kennt unser Volk kaum’, we are told ‘das Volk ist Josefine doch ergeben, nur nicht bedingungslos’ (DL 358). This may seem like splitting hairs, but it is an extremely significant distinction. In Buddhism, everything is ‘conditioned’ – the Law of Dependent Origination underpins all of Buddhist thought in its declaration that nothing in the world is absolute. This is another point of characterisation on which the mice are distinct from earlier, more intransigent figures in Kafka’s fiction, such as the K.s who cling to absolutes such as ‘innocence’ and ‘truth’ – the mouse folk belong to a new breed of enlightened Kafka figures which know when to ‘let go’. Perhaps readers of such a labyrinthine text will also learn to ‘let go’ of their expectations of linear, rational storytelling.

The narrator explores further the nature of the connection between the mice and Josefine and finds that, despite her controversial behaviour and questionable singing, she is still somehow their protégé and the folk are responsible for her wellbeing, although it is not clear why: ‘der Grund dessen ist niemandem klar, nur die Tatsache scheint festzustehn’ (DL 358). Josefine, not surprisingly, refutes this mooted father-child model: ‘sie glaubt, sie sei es, die das Volk beschütze’ (DL 359). However, before we can fully digest the implications of this reversal, the narrator admits that Josefine has never actually said anything of the sort: ‘Aus ihren Augen blitzt es’ (DL 360). Whatever she may or may not think, the narrator is clear on his view: ‘Freilich,

sie rettet uns nicht, and gibt uns keine Kräfte' (DL 360). There follows a long description of the stoic qualities of the mice people who are used to facing adversity and taking care of themselves. Yet again, a contradiction follows a positive statement as the narrator admits that the mice do respond to Josefine's singing in times of trouble. It is not the performance which helps them, though, but the 'Volksversammlung' (DL 361), as if Josefine provided the focal point around which to congregate peacefully and gather strength.

On several occasions the narrator has insisted on the importance of 'Stille' to the mouse people and downplayed the effect of Josefine's singing, but now after admitting that she does trigger some response he goes further by revealing that something in her whistling does indeed penetrate the mouse psyche. It is nothing to do with any musical effect, however, for it appears that this ordinary whistle is 'eine Botschaft des Volkes' and represents 'die armselige Existenz unseres Volkes mitten im Tumult der feindlichen Welt' (DL 362). The narrator goes one step further and claims that a 'proper' singer would not be received as well as Josefine, because a genuine singing performance would be completely out of place in times of trouble. Josefine – in the opinion of the mice – cannot sing, so her performance can take on another meaning, such as the epitome of 'miceness'. There is a twisted logic to this as befits the perlocutionary style, but the reader should note that we have now arrived at a position opposite to the opening declaration of the story, where Josefine was introduced as the 'Sängerin'. She has an undoubted effect on the mice folk, but she is no 'Gesangskünstler' (DL 362).

A long passage follows describing the 'Kindlichkeit' (DL 364) of the mice, but they are also 'vorzeitig alt', in another koan-style contradiction. Their lack of musicality stems from this premature ageing – they have no time to be young and playful. In another backhanded compliment the narrator suggests that through Josefine the mice can tap into their inner mouse nature, but her

whistling is 'stoßend', rather than 'perlend' (DL 366). It is just ordinary whistling, but detached from its ordinary setting it somehow acquires an artistic quality. In another Zen-style formulation, it seems Josefine is special through her lack of specialness – in this way she can reflect an accurate image of the mouse folk.

The last part of the story is taken up with Josefine's attempts to gain recognition for her art, which is never forthcoming on the terms she seeks. The narrator lists the detail of all her ruses, which are dismissed as 'Schauspiel' (DL 375), but she is never fully successful. The tale ends with her disappearance, which destroys the power she had won over the mouse spirit. The tale has now turned full circle to evoke the 'Macht' from the start, but rather than end in a eulogy for her, we are told that the mice will prevail ('weiterziehen').

Josefine is just a small episode in their history and they will get over her. The penultimate paragraph lists a flurry of questions in which the narrator wonders how the mouse folk will deal with her absence: 'Leicht wird es uns ja nicht werden' (DL 376). On closer inspection, however, the questions seem to answer themselves. To begin with: how can the crowds assemble in silence (without Josefine)? Answer, in the form of a question: Wasn't that the case when Josefine was there? Next question: was her 'wirkliches Pfeifen' louder than how it will be remembered? Answer, in the form of a question: Wasn't that the case when Josefine was there? Another answer, in the form of a question: Don't the mouse folk prefer to respect Josefine's song as a memory?

The final paragraph is similarly riddled with contradictions as the focus returns to Josefine. She has been 'erlöst von der irdischen Plage' (good), which was her lot as one of the 'Auserwählten' (bad). She will merge into the ranks of mouse heroes (good), but the mice have little regard for history (bad). The

narrator closes with a paradox, claiming that Josefine will be forgotten like all her fellow heroes.

Tightropes

The narrator opens the story by introducing a number of themes (Josefine's art, music, mouse nature) and, significantly, he has given his considered view: 'ich habe oft darüber nachgedacht' (DL 350). This reflection sets him apart from characters like Josef K., who spend their time chasing after influence despite being advised to think about their own situation. The narrator makes no specific recommendations regarding a particular path to tread, but the mouse folk's stoicism suggests Right View and Right Understanding are involved. More than any other work, this story is concerned with the path, the Middle Way, and there are numerous allusions to how attachments are handled with caution.³²⁰

The narrator talks of the attachments of the mouse people, including their relationship with Josefine, with a certain clarity and awareness: the mouse folk feels obliged to look after her, indulge her even, yet there is a line they will not cross. The attachments are social responsibilities and moral sensibilities rather than personal bonds. He also hints at the problems faced by Josefine as a result of her cravings for recognition and approval.

The result is the eventual demise/disappearance of the singer and the continued existence of the mice community: whatever 'pull' Josefine holds for them, she cannot exert total control over them. The mouse narrator resembles the beleaguered narrator from *Eine kleine Frau* who ponders his actions carefully, and is not led by whim or emotion. The narrator appears to have

320 Tauber describes the story's tone as 'cheerful', and finds within it 'a quiet devotion to life' and 'a quiet meditation' (pp. 197-98).

some recognition of craving and how it is important to deal with it at the source.

As the title indicates, there is a double focus in the story, with the first-person narrator giving the perspective of the mouse folk, but Josefine is the leading character and centre of attention. For the mouse folk, suffering is the general lot of their existence and they seem fairly phlegmatic in the way they shoulder hardships. Josefine's suffering is in contrast intensely personal and is more to do with her perception of not being valued enough – this puts her directly in line with figures such as the K.s, the hunger artist and the trapeze artist.

If the mouse folk show a tendency to detachment, Josefine provides all the examples of behaving with attachment. She craves respect, similar to the hunger artist and his demand for recognition. She cannot expect understanding from the unmusical mice, so she looks for other ways to exert influence.

One reason why Josefine finds it difficult to earn the admiration she craves is that the mice folk are united in their suffering – they share their troubles and do not take personal ownership of them, or wear their troubles like a badge of honour. Josefine wants to be seen as a kind of saviour, and in this role she finds identity or fulfilment. The mice do not need a saviour, however, for they have each other, and hence Josefine is more a figurehead or symbol for them, rather than a talisman or lucky charm. This sharing of the load is also how the mouse folk sees its responsibility towards Josefine – they do not interact with her as individuals, but as a group. Although the mice will go to great lengths to support and humour Josefine, their efforts are not 'bedingungslos'. This is a very Buddhist formulation, because in Buddhist thinking nothing can be unconditional. In Western eyes it may be considered admirable to describe something as unconditional, such as love, faith or

loyalty. It suggests purity and truth. However, to the Buddhist way of thinking, it suggests extremes and slavery, attachment to ideals and absolutes, and along this path lies suffering. The mouse folk are all the stronger for refusing any form of unconditionality in their relationships. They will do what they can for Josefine, but they will not be blinded by devotion to absolutes – they will act in accordance to what appears to cause the least suffering overall. For this reason, it is useful to view the mouse folk as paternalistic towards Josefine for it allows room both for an obligation towards her, as well as freedom to dismiss her criticism of them – they just see it as a child's rebellion, testing the boundaries of the relationship, but nothing that has to be bowed to.

Josefine's performances almost amount to a pretext for the mice to meet – in times of trouble they like to gather and Josefine's singing affords this opportunity. She cannot be satisfied by this arrangement because it suggests the mice are present in body but not in mind, as they are not an appreciative audience. Josefine's self-obsession often blinds her to this fact, and she is easily swayed by hangers-on.

In some ways the key to the relationship between Josefine and the community is succinctly expressed by the narrator's description of the singer's whistling as a representation of 'die armselige Existenz unseres Volkes mitten im Tumult der feindlichen Welt' (DL 362). This would explain the folk's 'adoption' of Josefine as a kind of embodiment of their status as underdog, as downtrodden but proud. The fact that she can't actually sing, and can barely even whistle, demonstrates in effect her unmusical nature and therefore reflects accurately an important mouse trait. If she were in fact a good singer, she could not be adopted as an 'everymouse' figure. This is the catch for Josefine: she has a straight choice between talent and devotion, but she wants both. It is not enough that she is cherished by the people: she wants to be

revered for her art, not for her lack of it. This is galling to her because of her attachment to her singing, to her notion of skillfulness.

In this respect she is very similar to other self-deluding 'quest' figures in Kafka's writing: she is fixated on the attainment of mutually exclusive goals. As Robertson explains, Josefine is not properly an artist and the mice folk use her as a medium through which the 'individual communicates with the communal spirit of his people'.³²¹ The mice have no problem with the seeming paradox (koan) of the community's singer being unable to sing because she simply 'represents' the people. Josefine misreads her position (koan) by assuming that she has become the people's singer by dint of her artistic talents. As her sense of self is linked to her art (not her being), she is exposed to continual disappointments. The hunger artist was skewered on the horns of this same dilemma, because he was offered the public's acclaim (though transitory) as the greatest faster, but he also craved their understanding of the boundless nature of his 'skill', which was never to be forthcoming, and in fact deep down he realised that his fasting was merely the expression of lack, not a triumph of resistance. Here, the comparison with Josefine holds true because she also wants recognition for something she does not have.

The story at one point embarks on a long description of how the mice lack a proper childhood – they are pressed into adulthood by the dangers that threaten them. This rushed passage out of infancy helps to explain a number of their features: they work well together and have little time to allow individual personalities to bloom. The implications of this from a Buddhist point of view are clear: the lack of a fully formed, self-centred self enables them not to get too attached to objects and ideals. They share a collective mentality and spirituality that provides the strength and fortitude necessary to

³²¹ Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism*, p. 281.

sustain them, when a population of 'me-driven' individuals would perhaps be easier to crush.

Josefine has been chosen as the community singer. As a reader, one might wonder why the mice need one if they are so unmusical, and by singling her out the community has perhaps caused some growth to her self-centredness – the position has gone to her head. By making her the representative of the whole, she is separated from the whole: the way to square the circle would only be possible if she understood the role and did not identify her 'self' with it. This has not been possible with Josefine, hence all the character differences – she is individualistic, self-serving and childish (she has managed to hang on to her 'youth'). She also claims to be musical and sees herself as a protector of the people, when the narrator talks in communal terms of 'Genossen' (DL 371).

This explains the added layer of indulgence towards her, because the mice feel guilty about not being able to appreciate her for her art – they can only offer her a token, symbolic admiration. All this suffering stems from the self being conscious of its separation and seeking to maintain its exclusivity as a guarantee of survival. The mice community could not survive as a group of individuals, whereas Josefine struggles to survive as one in the collective.

The story sits firmly in the Kafka tradition of observing the growth pains of the self as it struggles to maintain its independence and sovereignty. The difference with this story is perspective, because we have a narrator who not only suggests the inherent problems of staking claims for selfhood, but proposes an alternative where cutting away attachments need not be fatal, but can actually result in an enhanced existence in a world that can never be free of suffering.

The story is a study in how to hold on and let go at the same time. The mice are devoted to Josefine, but not attached to her; they risk dangers to

assemble before her, but effectively listen to the ‘silence’ around her rather than the whistling itself; they indulge her childish, work-shy whims as far as possible, but are never neglectful of their own responsibilities. In clear contrast, ‘Josefine aber gibt nicht nach’ (DL 374). This is in essence the reason for her downfall and perhaps by extension the reason for any descent into suffering: the inability to let go.

6.3 Sleepwalking into suffering

*Seeing that all things are transient, we stop craving and clinging to them, thus our happy memories and enjoyable day dreams cease to be so compelling.*³²²

In this collection, there are cases of unskillful self-absorption, where blinkered figures accumulate suffering by chasing after shadows, and of skillful detachment where enlightened figures strive to minimise suffering by opening their eyes. In *Erstes Leid*, the trapeze artist is focused clearly on his passion, but inadvertently sleepwalking his way along the highwire to suffering. He could probably walk the wire with his eyes closed, such is his skill, but he cannot see the attachment consuming him. In *Eine kleine Frau* the little woman seems to be quite aware of what she is doing, but her unprovoked attacks on the narrator and self-centred interests help classify her as the sleepwalking type. For his part, the narrator refuses to fall into the trap of self-pity, thus avoiding the temptation to personalise suffering.

It is possible to see disturbing elements in the unbalanced figure of the little woman, which makes the story potentially depressing, as a variation of the ‘Why me?’ lament that is raised when we cannot explain suffering. For Ronald Gray, the story is a projection of Kafka’s mental torment and can be compared with *Josefine*, which is taken as a document of neurosis.³²³ This

322 Thubten Chodron at www.thubtenchodron.org/DealingWithEmotions/ruminating.html.

323 Ronald Gray, p. 177.

seems a narrow reading, especially as there are elements to both stories which bear the hallmark of a healthy and insightful mind. The enlightened narrator figures talk us through how they deal with the hardships that have beset them; both the little woman and Josefine then play the role of the deluded 'Traumwandler' (in the mould of Josef K.) who sees phantoms where none are present.

In *Ein Hungerkünstler* there are parallels between Josef K. and the hunger artist. Josef K. is convinced of his innocence (not a trace of guilt in him) but he struggles to convey this message to others, until a late flicker of awareness reveals his delusions; the hunger artist is equally convinced of his innocence (not a trace of food eaten) but he struggles to persuade spectators of his integrity, until he too admits he does not deserve admiration.

The hunger artist can also be twinned with the other deluded performer in the collection, the trapeze artist. Both have a very firm grasp of what they want to achieve (endless fasting; another wire), but a very poor grip on reality. They exist within tightly drawn personal boundaries and have little significant contact with the outside world. This confirms their places in a long line of Kafka's sleepwalkers who fail to heed the warning signs around them. The trapeze artist is wrapped up in cotton wool by his minders, and the hunger artist is wrapped up in straw, but the effect is the same, as they wither away in their protective bubbles.

As in the case of Josef K., it is hard to condemn unequivocally a person who is misguided rather than wrong or evil. Who does the hunger artist harm, other than himself? Faced with such an ambivalent figure, the Western tendency to 'seek the answer' is a burden. Buddhist thinking would say this approach is in itself misguided, as an activity in propping up the self and not leading to enlightenment. Heidsieck suggests that the hunger artist sees martyrdom in his quest, and backs this up with Biblical references to Christ

on the cross.³²⁴ The trouble with this view from a Buddhist perspective is that martyrs by definition are to be admired: their suffering is ultimately not in vain for they achieve some other-worldly reward. This is never clear from the hunger artist, and by comparing the life-affirming figure of the panther and the hunger artist's pathetic demise one might conclude that the opposite is the case – his suffering was completely in vain, as even he himself did not understand why he suffered. His suffering is the definition of vanity, an obsession with the self. Any kind of attachment to suffering, such as his attempt to make a virtue out of necessity, is made to look questionable.

From the point of view of characterisation, *Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse* resembles *Eine kleine Frau* in that there are two 'poles' in the text that represent different positions: the deluded and the enlightened, or the attached and the detached. To be more accurate, it would be misleading to talk of opposing positions, as the two sides are not in a battle against each other, in the way that the K.s face off against the Court and the Castle. The narrator figures have to deal with a thorn in their side, but they do not try to eradicate the problem. They try to work through the issues caused by the differences, and this is particularly the case with the mouse narrator, as he explains the lengths to which the community goes to protect its singer. While Josefine joins the ranks of Kafka's sleepwalkers, the narrators work actively and selflessly to minimise the suffering felt by their fellow beings: this is the character of the Bodhisattva, devoted to the enlightenment of others.

6.4 Conclusion

'Pray pacify my mind,' cried a pupil who had waited seven days in the snow before gaining admission to the Master's room. 'Show me your mind,' said the

324 Arnold Heidsieck, *The Intellectual Contexts of Kafka's Fiction: Philosophy, Law, Religion* (New York: Camden House, 1994), p. 173.

*Master. 'I cannot produce it,' said the seeker. 'So; then I have pacified your mind,' said Bodhidharma.*³²⁵

Endings of Kafka's works can be problematic, once the point has been made of suffering associated with attachment, because the end of the work can be confused with the 'result' or the 'meaning'. If death is the final event, as often happens, this can lead to a pessimistic interpretation of the inevitability of suffering. There are few texts where Kafka's protagonists come through unscathed or enlightened: K. eventually sees the light and the narrator of *Eine kleine Frau* comes to terms with his issues, but most other major figures fall by the wayside. Josefine is a major figure, and she too fails to survive, but the mice as a people, as a race, as a collective, are still standing: 'dieses Volk zieht weiter seines Weges' (DL 376).

The collection *Ein Hungerkünstler* does not fit the conventional boundaries of the Kafkaesque because there are clear pointers on how to avoid suffering. The artist figures end up crying, dying or disappearing, which might suggest that there is something life-threatening about art, but it is rather the relationship between the individuals and their art that determines their fate. When art (trapeze swinging, fasting, singing) is seen as 'the way' to enhancing or defining the self, suffering will follow because the individual is attaching to a particular branch of skill or knowledge in order to arrive at a particular destination. In Buddhism, familiarity with the truth of impermanence makes it clear that there is no such thing as a fixed destination. The enlightened figures do not strive after perfection – artistic or otherwise – but practise awareness.

The themes addressed by The Four Noble Truths are well aired throughout the collection and it is noteworthy, albeit surely coincidental, that a different Noble Truth comes to the fore in each of the four stories. The First Noble Truth of suffering is clearly the focus of *Erstes Leid*, as we see the

325 Humphreys, *Buddhism*, p. 182.

dawning of the realisation that human existence is never far from sorrow and disappointment. The Second Noble Truth relates to the cause of suffering, and *Ein Hungerkünstler* announces in 'hunger' the root of the problem. The Third Noble Truth focuses on the next step, the cessation of suffering by cutting out the source of the attachment, and this is an approach considered at length by the narrator in *Eine kleine Frau*. The Fourth Noble Truth indicates the path to a life free of suffering, and the story of the mouse folk and their singer Josefine illustrates the chasm between the 'high road' of enlightened practices and the 'low road' of self-delusion.

J. P. Stern describes *Josefine* as Kafka's 'most serene' story, and it is perhaps not coincidental that he detects in the work a quality of 'awareness' that sets it apart from others. Kafka's depiction of the mouse folk reveals an understanding of a people – rather than an individual – faced with suffering: 'The nation [...] is not only beleaguered and threatened, but it is aware, constantly and almost unremittingly aware, of the threats to its existence and survival, and ready to meet these threats.'³²⁶ Stern was referring to the Jewish nation, but it is not necessary to define what race of people the mouse folk represents. After a procession of deluded, blinkered and self-obsessed figures, Kafka simply finished his writing with an example of an awakened outlook.

³²⁶ J. P. Stern, 'Franz Kafka on Mice and Men' in J. P. Stern and J. J. White, eds, *Paths and Labyrinths* (London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1985), p. 141.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

7.1 Change in perspective

*Ich glaube, man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen. Wenn das Buch, das wir lesen, uns nicht mit einem Faustschlag auf den Schädel weckt, wozu lesen wir dann das Buch?*³²⁷

Kafka's remarks to Pollak in 1904 predate all of his celebrated literature, but they are significant because they touch on two key elements of Buddhist teaching in a Zen style. The 'biting' and 'waking' can be seen to represent suffering and awakening, and the blow to the head is a favoured tactic among Zen masters keen to drum (literally) some enlightenment into their students. This dissertation argues that the suffering Kafka went on to portray throughout his writing is best understood when it is taken as the 'Faustschlag' that awakens us, rather than the knockout punch that delivers us from our misery. This difference in perspective is made possible by approaching the texts from a Buddhist viewpoint, and it allows for a 'skillful' interpretation of Kafka's work: suffering is the inevitable effect of personalised attachments to actions and thoughts, not the unavoidable consequence of living in a hostile world.

It is interesting to note that this point can also be made in relation to how Kafka saw himself as a writer, as well as to what he created. Corngold and Wagner find it significant that Kafka referred to himself using the word 'Schriftsteller' rather than 'Autor' or 'Dichter', because it 'assigned the function of setting down script' in producing 'literature', in preference to the 'authority' and 'autonomy' associated with the other terms.³²⁸ Kafka's choice of term works from a Buddhist viewpoint too, as the role of 'Schriftsteller' displaces

327 Kafka's letter to Oskar Pollak (27 January, 1904), from *Briefe 1900-1912*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1999), p. 36.

328 Corngold and Wagner, pp. 110-11.

attention from the person towards the product, whereas the author and poet claim ownership and creative rights which contribute to the definition of the self.

To support my thesis that the 'biting and waking' aspect of Kafka's works has acquired unnecessarily negative connotations, I have explored two routes to developing a Buddhist approach: the illocutionary method, which uses the ideas and principles underpinning Buddhist thinking to understand the contexts represented in Kafka's writing; and the perlocutionary method, which experiences the textual cul-de-sacs and labyrinths as immediate expressions of the underlying emptiness (*sunyata*) of reality.

Kafka's early comments on reading as a means of awakening are consistent with the comments later attributed to him by Janouch when he assigns the cause of human suffering to ignorance, wandering through life as a 'Traumwandler'. The image of the sleepwalker is useful in finding a different way to read Kafka because it embodies a paradox: the idea that we can be active, decisive and purposeful, and yet at the same time be ineffective, marginal and directionless. As we sleepwalk, we take centre stage in an imaginary world that is of no substance; when we wake up, we recognise the status of that unreal 'I' and its universe. The Buddhist awakening endeavours to transfer this realisation of sleepwalking to our ordinary lives, so that we become aware that our notions of a fixed self and absolute ideals are figments of our imagination. In Buddhist thinking, suffering is certain, but the 'person' that experiences it is difficult to define and ephemeral. Kafka's work tells the story of how we invert this natural order, by hanging on to our self as certain and rejecting instances of suffering as passing afflictions. The wake-up calls that shock his fictional characters are designed to 'short-circuit' their twisted wires of perception and help them access reality beyond the imperfect, personalised connection: 'It is because our way of observing things is deeply

rooted in our self-centered ideas that we are disappointed when we find everything has only a tentative existence. But when we actually realize this truth, we will have no suffering.’³²⁹

The reason a Buddhist approach to Kafka’s work makes it seem less oppressive lies in its commitment to freedom.³³⁰ The rejection of a fixed, meaningful sense of self sounds bleak, but that is merely the negative flipside to the opportunity to be free from attachments. A Buddhist reading of Kafka turns on the same flipside, as it is characterised by the same positive outlook, to remove the limitations of self-interest and liberate the possibilities of impermanence. The problem of finding ‘meaningfulness’ in the gaps and contradictions in Kafka’s narratives has often been taken as a reflection of the helplessness of the human condition in the face of sinister, overpowering forces. From a Buddhist point of view, however, the paradoxes and equivocations represent benign obstacles to ‘prevent’ us from trying too hard to ‘make sense’, rather than malign barriers to fixing meaning. The literary tripwires operate as koans to dissuade us from the unskillful pursuit of attachment to meaning. Josef K.’s unwarranted arrest (justice), K.’s dubious status (rights), the unexplained suffering of the ‘kleine Frau’ (happiness), the infinite frustrations of the circus artists (achievement), Josefine’s singing (identity) – their frustrations all have perlocutionary effects that recall anicca, anatta and dukkha.

To the Western mindset, paradoxes are problems to be solved, cases where logic loses its way or where conflicting ideas clash: they must be accounted for, so as not to disturb the semblance of order – they are tolerated but serve to irritate not enlighten. Hence, Josef K.’s unspecified guilt, K.’s

329 Shunryu Suzuki Roshi in *Tricycle* at www.tricycle.com/daily-dharma/new-way-observation.

330 ‘The mighty ocean has one taste, the taste of salt. Just so, the Dharma-Vinaya has one taste, the taste of freedom.’ Sangharakshita refers to the Buddha’s own description of his teaching (p. 12).

ambiguous appointment, Josefine's 'singing' – these have to be explained away to 'fit' a meaning, so that there are no 'loose ends'.

In Zen koans, however, paradoxes are welcomed because they are windows through which we glimpse the underlying truth of emptiness. Rather than trying to explain them (and close the windows), they are accepted for what they are. Felix Greß remarks on the commitment made by Kafka's characters towards capturing 'Verhältnisse zum Unsagbaren',³³¹ but the quests after recognition and self-validation are often a double-edged sword with harmful consequences if handled improperly. Many figures from Kafka's later fiction, such as the trapeze artist, the hunger artist and the land surveyor, set objectives they struggle to define: 'sie alle streben zu einem Unbestimmten, das sie nicht positiv benennen können.'³³² Their quests exemplify the Western pursuit of meaningfulness, and the unwillingness to tolerate paradox. Their failures lead to the Kafkaesque crystallising into a description of any inscrutable, insurmountable force that condemns us to suffering and death.

For a Buddhist, however, the quests of Kafka's later works are characterised by delusion not compulsion, and by rigidity not inevitability. Josef K. stakes his life on an innocence he cannot articulate; K. struggles to enter a domain he knows nothing about; the hunger artist chases after the perfect fast which must result in death. Kafka's heroes strive after something they cannot name, and this must qualify as a definition of 'non-sense'.

7.2 A new Kafkaesque

When the Buddha taught, he didn't say that we were bad people or that there was some sin that we had committed [...] He taught that there is a kind of innocent misunderstanding that we all share, something that can be turned

331 Greß, p. 288.

332 Ibid., p. 288.

*around, corrected and seen through, as if we were in a dark room and someone showed us where the light switch is.*³³³

This dissertation has shown that there is a close correlation between Buddhist thinking and the conditions portrayed in Kafka's fictional world, especially from *Der Proceß* onwards. Both illocutionary and perlocutionary approaches to his work support a Buddhist reading, resulting in a strong case for re-appraising the definition of the Kafkaesque as something that 'runs counter to human directions or goals or aims' and 'serves as a form of bedevilment'.³³⁴

For Christian Schärf, Kafka's late texts explore 'die Unfähigkeit zu leben', with *Das Schloß* in particular a novel to end all novels: '*Das Schloß* ist Kafkas Todesroman, die Feier seines Verschwindens. Und damit ist der Text schon so etwas wie ein Testament, jedoch ein nicht zu entzifferndes.'³³⁵ This dark view suggests that Kafka's obsession with writing so consumed him that his works represent a kind of literary suicide. The Buddhist view would contrast strongly with this because the ignorant failings of his self-obsessed characters, such as Josef K. and the hunger artist, are offset by the enlightened breakthroughs of his detached stoics, such as K. and the mouse narrator.

In terms of its themes and contexts, the Kafkaesque is said to describe harrowing events and unjustified suffering, but a Buddhist outlook uncovers positive alternatives within the illocutionary messages by drawing on teachings such as The Three Universal Characteristics, The Four Noble Truths and the Law of Dependent Origination. When Josef K. is arrested by a punitive Court on an unspecified charge and K.'s appointment is thwarted by an inaccessible Castle, the finger of suspicion can be turned on the heroes themselves for their attachments and spiritual ignorance. When the trapeze artist and the hunger artist endure suffering for their art, it is their self-

333 Chödrön, p. 13.

334 Karl, p. 757.

335 Schärf, pp. 187-88.

consuming obsessiveness which drives them into a spiral of dissatisfaction, not insufficient equipment or uninspired spectators. When Josefine and the 'kleine Frau' complain they are misunderstood and mistreated, their prickly self-defensiveness imprisons them in paranoid isolation, not the thoughts and deeds of their fellows.

As for the expressive elements of the Kafkaesque, the reader suffers contradictions, aporia and paradoxes which are taken to represent the hostile, chaotic and fragmentary universe we are trapped in, but a Zen approach uses this textual and semantic discomfort to flush out the assumptions and conventions that govern our lives. When the reader is baffled by Titorelli's insight into the law and the mayor's account of K.'s appointment, this confusion opens a doorway into a place free of idealised notions of innocence and justice, rather than confirmation of inescapable defeat. When the trapeze artist and hunger artist lie crumpled in their luggage rack or pile of straw, their vulnerability reminds us to avoid extreme sensibility. When the first-person narrators talk of the frustrations prepared by the irascible 'kleine Frau' and the infuriating Josefine, their calm resolve shows how to rise above the vagaries of existence, rather than sink under their weight.

At the heart of these recast values of the Kafkaesque lies the capacity to detach from the demands and conditions of selfhood. This is not defeat or surrender, but a simple change in outlook, as exemplified by K.'s victory over his self-importance.³³⁶ This enlightenment comes in the form of an engaged non-attachment, a commitment to work towards a goal without using it to define a part of the self. The awakened selflessness shown by K. and the first-person narrators are not chance aberrations, because they capture the wish expressed in one of Kafka's diary entries about gaining an outlook on life 'in

336 'All of our tendencies, difficulties, and pain come from self-importance. Clinging to a self is a strong habit.' Kongtrül, p. 58.

der das Leben zwar sein natürliches schweres Fallen und Steigen bewahre aber gleichzeitig mit nicht minderer Deutlichkeit als ein Nichts, als ein Traum, als ein Schweben erkannt werde'.³³⁷ Significantly, this 'Nichts' is not a nihilist craving for oblivion, but a Zen-like wish for action without karmic residue:

Etwa als Wunsch einen Tisch mit peinlich ordentlicher Handwerksmäßigkeit zusammenzuhämmern und dabei gleichzeitig nichts zu tun und zwar nicht so daß man sagen könnte: 'ihm ist das Hämmern ein Nichts' sondern 'ihm ist das Hämmern ein wirkliches Hämmern und gleichzeitig auch ein Nichts', wodurch ja das Hämmern noch kühner, noch entschlossener, noch wirklicher und wenn Du willst noch irrsinniger geworden wäre.³³⁸

Mark Harman takes the 'paradoxical table' here to stand for 'the literary works that Kafka will eventually construct and de-construct. His urge to create and at the same time destroy certainly anticipates the shape of his self-obliterating fictions'.³³⁹ However, rather than self-obliteration, it would be more uplifting (and enlightening) to talk of self-effacement, where detachment from one's work leads to a more positive outcome.

As Pema Chödrön explains in the quotation heading this section, the Buddha did not take the view that people were bad or sinful, but simply that they were not properly aware of what they were doing. Similarly, Kafka was said to have labelled his fellow human beings as 'Traumwandler', suggesting that their troubles come from not being 'awake'. As the Buddha's teaching was intended to illuminate, Kafka's writing about suffering shows us the light switch in a dark room.

337 Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*, eds. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Muller and Malcolm Pasley (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1990), p. 855.

338 Ibid., p. 855.

339 Mark Harman, "'Torturing the Gordian Knot': Kafka and Metaphor" in Stanley Corngold and Ruth V. Gross, eds, *Kafka for the Twenty-First Century* (Rochester: Camden House, 2011), p. 55.

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